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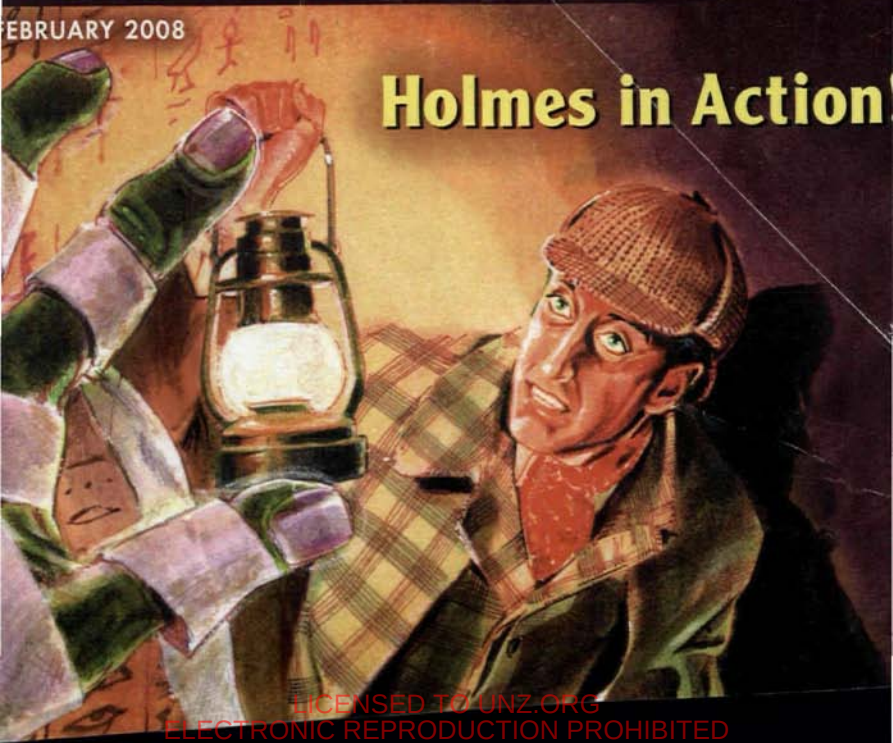

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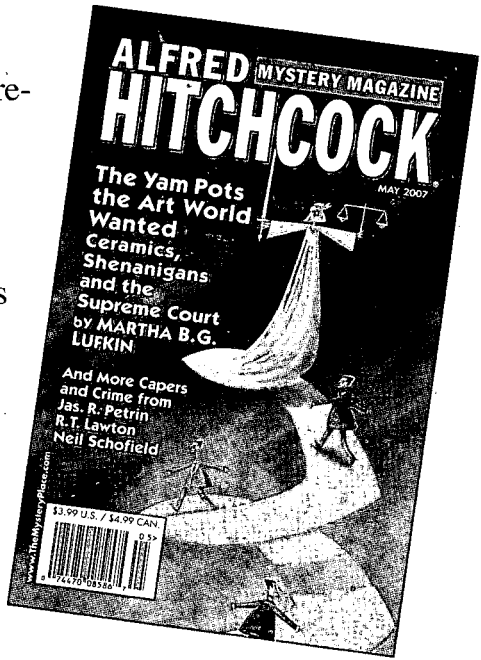

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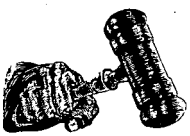

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THE DEVIL'S ACRE

by Steve Hockensmith

Urias Smythe
Smythe & Associates Publishing, Ltd.
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Smythe:

I trust this letter finds you and your associates well. I can only assume it finds the lot of you mighty *busy*, as I have yet to hear your reaction to the book I submitted to you last month: *On the Wrong Track, or Lockhart's Last Stand, An Adventure of the Rails*.

Not that I am in the slightest impatient to have you get to it. Quite the contrary. Like a fine wine—or, to be more democratically minded, a jug of corn-mash moonshine—my book can but ripen with age. Though I could perhaps add that the public's interest in sampling said concoction might likely diminish as the events that precipitated its distilling recede ever further into the past. Even as dazzling an episode as the commandeering of a Southern Pacific express train fades with time, just as fine wine and moonshine alike eventually turn to vinegar.

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But why point this out to you? As a successful publisher, you are no doubt well aware of the importance of striking while the (in this case, railroad) iron is hot. So I leave it to you to proceed at what I assume is your usual measured, deliberate, dawdling pace.

By no means rush yourselves on my account—or your own!

No, I write to you today not to urge undue (or due) haste in your reply. Rather, it's because, while my book has lain fallow, I have not.

The action in this new Big Red/Old Red story takes place between that of the author's second novel *On the Wrong Track* (St. Martin's, paperback, January '08) and the book due to be released this month, *The Black Dove* (St. Martin's, hardcover). The inimitable duo debuted in *EQMM* and rejoin us in each February issue as part of our tribute to Sherlock Holmes. ¶

As I mentioned in my last letter to you, based on sheer quantity of thrills, chills, and close scrapes, the heroes of your own *Deadwood Dick Magazine* and *Billy Steele: Boy Detective* seem like elderly shut-in spinsters compared to my brother and myself. While ol' Dick or little Billy manage to get themselves into some kind of dustup each and every month, hardly a day passes without a new threat to life and limb for me and Gustav. Why, I'm sometimes reluctant to so much as get out of bed to make water for fear I'll be attacked by rampaging Apaches or kidnapped by pirates on my way to the privy.

As a case in point, allow me to relate the latest near-calamity to befall us—a tale, incidentally, that I think would fit quite snugly in the pages of one of your magazines. *Jesse James Library,* say. Or, even better, *Big Red and Old Red Library.*

To refresh your memory, Big Red and Old Red would be me and my elder brother Gustav. We picked up our nicknames on the cattle trails we once worked as cowboys, though our handles have little of the drover's usual irony about them. A fat cowhand may be "Skinny," a thin one "Tubby," or a dumb one "Professor," but I am with no uncertainty about it *big.* Old Red's not old per se, having put in a mere twenty-seven years on this earth of ours, but he does tend to act aged, often coming across as crotchety as Methuselah suffering a flareup of lumbago. As for the "Red," our hair accounts for that, it being . . . well, as you might assume, not exactly powder blue.

Having recently lost our jobs as Southern Pacific rail dicks (the railroad frowning upon the mislaying of company property, be it a coffee mug, a signal lantern, or—*ahem*—a locomotive), Old Red and I found ourselves jobless, friendless, and near-penniless in the S.P.'s hometown: San Francisco. Naturally, we wouldn't be welcome at the Palace Hotel along with the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds and whichever other visiting fat cats might be on hand. So we ended up

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instead in the neighborhood known as "the Barbary Coast" . . . along with the sailors and the macks and the rest of the wharf rats.

Of course, the Coast has a certain reputation, what with its dance halls, deadfalls, footpads, floozies, and all-around atmosphere of iniquity. And it lives up to said reputation—or perhaps I should say sinks *down* to it. But once you've seen a pack of young drovers cut their wolves loose at the end of a five-month cattle drive, there's little in the way of wildness that can shock you anymore. Take Dodge City of a Saturday night, switch all the Stetsons to sailor's caps and derbies, and multiply the noise and chaos by a factor of four, and you'll get the Barbary Coast. We figured we could handle it.

We chose for our lodgings a rooming house on Pacific invitingly named The Cowboy's Rest. The *Cockroach's* Rest would have been more accurate, as we saw more *cucarachas* than cowpokes thereabouts. But shoddy and shantylike though the place might be, it offered several advantages as a base of operations, the foremost being (in my brother's mind) the cheapness of its rooms and (in mine) the cheapness of the drinks served in the saloon downstairs. The Rest is also a mere twenty-minute walk from the local office of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, and it was there we intended to go as soon as the scrapes and bruises we'd collected during our brief run as railroad detectives had healed.

Old Red, you'll recall (assuming you've read my book by now and are merely in the process of securing the huge sums of money required to properly publicize its publication), had it in his head that he'd make a top-rail sleuth. He'd picked up this seemingly peculiar notion from the tales of the late, great Sherlock Holmes that have been appearing of late in the pages of one of your competitors. I say *seemingly* peculiar because, as it turns out, Gustav really does have a natural talent for detectiving . . . even if his attempts to prove it tend to end in disaster.

Come to think of it, they can *begin* disastrously, too—which was almost the case here.

When not sniffing around after an actual mystery, you see, Old Red likes to practice his craft on strangers, sizing them up for clues he can use to piece together the particulars of their lives. "Just got throwed out by his wife," he might say to me, nodding at a glum-looking gent with rouge on his cheek and a wrinkled shirttail hanging from his carpetbag. Or "Best lock up the silver when she's in to clean" as we pass a shifty-eyed woman in a maid's uniform—just before she veers off into a pawnshop, a muffled, metallic clinking coming from the bundle tucked under one arm.

It was with this pastime in mind that Gustav and I secured for ourselves a corner table in the barroom of the Cowboy's Rest the other day. My brother would sharpen his wits with observation and deducification, I would dull mine with steam beer, and thus we might wile away a pleasant afternoon.

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And pleasant it was, too . . . right up to the moment someone got it in his head to kill us.

The someone in question was a fellow of the type the Frisco papers have taken to calling a "hoodlum"—a young, oily-haired hooligan wearing an oversized frock coat, a red velvet vest, a rakishly tilted felt hat, and a plain old-fashioned sneer. He'd been seated with a similarly slicked-up and scowly compadre a few tables over, and their hissy whispers and low, dark laughter had about them a most definitive air of skulduggery. This, of course, attracted my brother's undivided attention . . . so undivided, in fact, it eventually drew some attention itself.

"What's your problem, m_____?" one of the hoodlums snarled, addressing my brother with a term your typesetters would no doubt refuse to put in print.

"I ain't got no problem," Gustav replied.

"You sure as h__ do."

The hood rose from his chair. He probably topped out at a mere five foot four . . . but when he whipped out his six-inch knife he may as well have been Goliath.

"Why you been staring at us, a_____?"

"Look, friend," I cut in, "I can't speak for the a_____ here, but *I'm* starin' at one heck of a big pigsticker. And frankly, I'd rather I wasn't. So why not put it away and let me buy you a beer, huh?"

"Shut up, c_____. I was talking to *him*." The young thug took a step toward our table, his glare locked on my brother. "Why the eyeballing? You some kind of g_____ copper?"

"Nope," Old Red said . . . and said no more. My brother may be a mighty slick thinker, but when it comes to talking there are times he's about as slick as flypaper. Not that it really mattered just then.

As the hood took another step toward us, his friend stood to join him. This second fellow was bigger than his buddy, and a gold band gleamed across one of his curled fists—brass knuckles. Maybe not quite so deadly as a knife, yet still a good sight more dangerous than the bare skin-and-bone knuckles we had to defend ourselves with.

Obviously, *slick* wasn't going to get us spit with these hombres. The only thing they'd understand was *rough*. So that's what I aimed to give them.

"All right, you stupid q____-b_____ z_____s," I growled, coming to my feet. "You asked for it."

The hoodlums froze, looking confused. Apparently, they'd never been called q____-b_____ z_____s before.

I picked up my chair.

"Y'all might wanna clear out," I said to the only other patrons in the place—a pair of pea-coated sailors who sat leering at our little standoff as if we were the cancan dancers at one of the melodeons up the street. "There's gonna be an awful lotta wood and brain and such flyin' around here in a second."

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The sailors scooted their seats back a few feet.

"Thank you." I pivoted and swung the chair up over my head, facing the hoodlums like a baseball batter awaiting the first pitch. "I do like to have me a little extra elbow room when I'm about to serve up a whuppin'."

"Put down the chair, Brother."

I peeked back at Old Red. Not only was he still in his chair, he sat so motionless he could have been mistaken for a piece of furniture himself.

"For a feller who prides himself on his powers of observation, you seem to be missin' something a tad obvious," I said. "Like, for instance, that those ain't fresh-picked posies them b_____s got in their hands."

"Oh, I ain't worried about them two," my brother said.

The smaller of the two hoodlums spat out a cackle. "You oughta be, f_____."

"Nope. Y'all ain't gonna lay a hand on us." Gustav jerked his head to the left. "It's that scattergun makes me nervous."

"Scattergun?"

I craned my head around to get a better look over my shoulder.

There was our landlady, one "Cowboy Mag," standing behind the bar with a sawed-off shotgun in her hands.

"It might be pointed at you two, but still . . ." Old Red went on, talking to the hoods. "Them things got quite a spray to 'em. Never know who's gonna pick up a pellet when the buckshot flies."

"Ma'am," I said with a polite nod to Mag, and I set my chair gently on the floor and took a seat.

"Ha!" the thug with the blade barked without bothering to turn for a look himself. "Like I'm gonna fall for that!"

"Listen up, you p_____ v_____s!" Mag boomed, and just in case she wasn't speaking loud enough, she let her shotgun get in a word, too—by thumbing back the hammers. "No h_____ f_____s gonna l_____ with my j___-y_____ customers in my w_____ place. So you'd better t____ s_____ your v_____ r_____s outta here . . . and you can go l____ your u____ g____s up your d____ m____s while you're at it!"

Now, we drovers might not be the worldliest fellows, but when it comes to cursing we're as learned as any man jack on this earth. "Q____-b_____ z_____s" not something you'll pick up on any old street corner, you know.

For sheer width and breadth of filth, though, Cowboy Mag had me beat by a country mile. To be truthful, I didn't understand half of what the woman had just said.

Her intentions were clear enough, though: If those hoods didn't skedaddle, they'd soon find their "d____ m____s" filled with lead.

The hoods skedaddled—*pronto*.

"G_____," Mag chuckled as she put her double-barreled bouncer

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back beneath the bar. "That'll teach those t_____ h_____s to p_____ around in my b_____ m_____."

(As I assume you have by now fully absorbed the flavor of conversation in the Coast, I won't bother with any more _____s. Just insert your own d___ or s___ or some such between every other word and you'll be getting the talk pretty much as Gustav and I heard it.)

"Thanks kindly for the help," I said.

Mag leaned forward onto the bar. She was an oversized woman in body as well as spirit, and for a moment there it looked like her bosom was about to spill from her low-cut dress like twin pumpkins from a cornucopia.

"If I thought you two were coppers, it's *you* I would've run off," she said. "Cowboys, ain't you?"

"Ma'am," I said, "you are a regular Sherlock Holmes."

Old Red rolled his eyes . . . beneath his big white Boss of the Plains. We may have been spitting distance from the Pacific, yet he still insisted on dressing like we were moving cattle up the Chisholm Trail. And while I'd tried to citify myself with a cheap suit and a new bowler, I knew I couldn't pass for a slicker just yet—not with my Plains drawl and sun-darkened skin.

"Got a soft spot for punchers, do you?" I said to Mag.

"Ol' Mag's nothing *but* soft spots!" she roared back, giving her shoulders a shake that set her bosom to quivering like we were in the midst of a California earthquake. "But yeah . . . they don't call me 'Cowboy Mag' cuz I'm crazy about *tailors*. Used to have hands coming through the Coast all the time, bringing cattle in from Monterey and Sonoma. Not so much anymore. Which is why I'm so pleased to have a couple real buckaroos like yourselves around for a while. So . . . what brings you thisaway, anyhow?"

"Bad luck, mostly," I said, and I offered up a heavily expurgated version of our woes (the full tale being offered exclusively to Smythe & Associates . . .. for the moment).

"So now you're broke, huh?" Mag said when I was done.

As "Would we be stayin' in this dump if we weren't?" struck me as more than a trifle rude, I offered up a simple "Yup" instead.

"Well, I can help you with that. Cowboys can always get work on the docks, you know. You're handy with knots and ain't afraid to work up a little sweat. Tell you what—"

Mag produced a stubby pencil from somewhere in her voluminous gray-black hair and began scribbling across the front page of that day's *Morning Call*.

"Just say Cowboy Mag sent you."

She ripped off a strip of paper and held it out to me. On it, I saw once I'd walked up to take it, were scrawled these words:

NO. 35 PACIFIC STREET—ASK FOR JOHNNY

"Feel like tryin' your luck as a dockhand?" I said to Old Red.

My brother shrugged. "I reckon I don't feel like starvin'."

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I finished my beer with a gulp, Gustav took two to polish off his, and off we went.

Outside, the sky above was clear and blue . . . and the street below it crowded and befouled. Our little corner of the Coast was so jam-packed with dens of sin, folks had dubbed it the "Devil's Acre," and certainly this day it had every appearance of being one of Hell's more swarming quarters. Great herds of drunken men staggered from saloon to dance hall, dance hall to brothel, and then brothel back to saloon to begin the cycle anew. They paused only to piss, puke, or pass out, and no matter which it was they were likely relieved of their wallets in the process. For once, it was almost an advantage being flat busted, as the pickpockets had little to pick from ours but lint.

It took us nearly a quarter-hour to slog through this quagmire of corruption to No. 35 Pacific Street, and in that time we laid eyes on more decadence and depravity than most Christians see in a lifetime. I wasn't sure exactly what to expect at journey's end—a union hall or shipping office, maybe. So when it turned out to be yet another dive drinkery, I was surprised less by this discovery than by my own naiveté. The natives wouldn't have stood for an actual place of work in the Barbary Coast. Why, it would be an affront to community standards.

"After you," I said to Old Red . . . which meant I was kept waiting on the sidewalk a spell, for my brother made no move to go inside. He just stood there staring at the entrance to that watering hole.

"It's called a 'door,'" I explained helpfully. "Folks put 'em in the sides of buildings so you don't have to climb down the chimney to get inside. Wanna give it a try?"

Gustav nodded at the saloon. It was a deadfall—an unlicensed groggery of the sort that so skimps on pretense it doesn't even bother having a name. You know it's a place for drinking simply because a steady stream of men stumble in drunk and stumble out drunker.

"Kinda seedy, ain't it?" Old Red said.

"As a watermelon. But that'd be about right for fellers workin' the piers, wouldn't it?"

"Them and certain others."

"You got a certain 'certain others' in mind?"

My brother shook his head. "Not *certain* certain, no."

"What is it, then? Your Holmesifyin' givin' you pause somehow?"

"Nope. Just my gut." Old Red turned to spit in the street, then squinted again at the door to the deadfall. "You know how there's *certain* roadhouses, *certain* ranches you hear whispers about. The ones the smart fellers ride around."

"Sure."

"Well . . ."

Gustav spat again—then reached up and tugged my bowler down hard over my ears.

"Hey!" I protested.

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My brother leaned first to the right, then to the left, examining the back of my head.

"Naw, that won't do at all. Them little derbies ain't got enough brim to 'em."

"What in the world are you babblin' about?"

Old Red tilted my hat back so it rode up high on my forehead.

"Your hair," he said. "I'd try to hide mine, but that wouldn't do us no good with my moustache to give us away."

He scowled at me a moment, then nodded gruffly.

"All right. I reckon that just might work. It's a good thing we don't look much alike, aside from bein' redheads."

"Yeah, I thank the good Lord for it every day. Now you wanna tell me what you're playin' mad hatter for? Why's it so important to cover up my hair?"

"Cuz we ain't goin' into that there dive together."

"We ain't?"

"No, we ain't. I'll go in first and do me a little scout before askin' for 'Johnny,' whoever he is. Then you mosey in a little later and make like we don't know each other. If everything looks to be on the up and up, I'll take off my hat, and you can just come on over and introduce yourself. But up till then, I want you hangin' back . . . just in case."

"Just in case *what*? Ain't nothin' gonna happen to us in a saloon in the middle of the d____ day."

Gustav turned toward the deadfall again.

"We'll see what kinda day it is," he said grimly. Then he went inside.

I passed the next few minutes watching the half-clothed strumpets across the street try to entice passersby into their cathouse "cribs" for a little "fun." I'm not opposed to fun on general principle—far from it—but personally I don't consider a raging case of crabs to be a barrel of laughs. I was not tempted.

In any event, I reckoned Old Red didn't need much time for his reconnoiter: From the outside, at least, that saloon looked about as roomy as your average outhouse. You could probably scout the place out without so much as turning your head.

So soon enough, I was striding inside . . . and quickly realizing I'd been only half right. Sure, the place was small, with only five or six scattered tables, a bar barely the length of a couple coffins, and a ceiling so low it'd put splinters in my lid if I walked with too much spring in my step. But it was dark and noisy in there, too, and I needed a moment to get my bearings before I could even begin to look for my brother.

If ever there was a tavern intended exclusively for the use of bats and hoot owls, this was it, for it was hard to believe anyone else could be expected to navigate in such a gloom. I stumbled to the bar and ordered a beer from a man I could barely see, and when he plonked it down a moment later I found it more by sound than sight.

My eyes adjusted to the murk as I worked on my beer, though,

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and after a few sips I spied Old Red. He was at the far end of the bar, on the other side of a dark-suited man so broad, squat, and round he could've passed for a pickle barrel. I assumed this was "Johnny," as he and Gustav were hunched over the bar together, sipping drinks and talking in low voices.

My brother's Boss of the Plains was still perched atop his head.

I nursed my beer and did my darnedest to eavesdrop. Unfortunately, the boisterous har-har-harring of the other patrons—most of them foreign sailors, local drunks, or the hoodlums who made both their prey—drowned out whatever it was Old Red and Johnny were whispering.

After I'd been there maybe five minutes, tippling with the dainty sips of a society dame at a tea party, the bartender stopped across from me and shook a dirty finger at my glass.

"You drinkin' that or waitin' for it to evaporate?"

I scooped up my beer, poured it down my throat, and slapped a nickel on the bar.

"Another, please."

The barkeep filled my glass from a froth-topped pitcher that was almost—*almost*—as grimy as he was himself.

"This is a bar," he snarled, putting the pitcher down hard. "You just want something to lean against, go find yourself a streetlamp."

I nodded and took a healthy gulp of my fresh beer. (Well, freshly poured, anyhow. It tasted so stale I wouldn't have been surprised to learn it had come to America aboard the *Mayflower.)* As the bartender stalked away, I sneaked a peek to my right, hoping I hadn't drawn too much attention to myself by *not* behaving like a boozy ass.

Johnny was turned away from me, toward Gustav, his wide back blocking my view. As for my brother, all I could see of him was his hat. He was still wearing it, that much I could tell, but the angle of it seemed odd. It was tilted forward, the brim almost in a straight line up and down, as though Old Red was hunched over the bar to read something—which I knew couldn't be the case, since he reads about as well as a catfish plays poker.

I was just about to lean back and try for a better look when the barkeep barked out, "Keys! *Keys!"*

I followed his gaze to a scratched-up old piano at the back of the room. A gangly, unshaven old-timer was drooping on a stool beside it, head on chest, eyes closed.

"Wake up, Keys!" the bartender roared. "Time to earn your keep!"

"Yeah, come on!" someone shouted. "Play us a tune, Keys!"

"How about 'Auld Lang Syne'?" someone else called out.

Most of the customers roared with laughter. The rest—like me—watched with wary half-smiles as Keys blinked himself blearily awake and began dragging his stool around to the front of the piano. This was apparently part of some comical custom of the place, but the guffaws had a cruel edge to them, like the cheers at a bullfight.

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The old man brought his long arms up over his head, held them there a moment, then crashed his hands down upon the keyboard.

He wasn't just banging away, though. He'd struck a chord—one with a low, ominous tone. He repeated it twice, loud and quick, then let it float there in the air like a black cloud.

Then came a ray of sunshine cutting through the gloom—a bright melody that echoed out of the piano ragged and off-tune yet still merrily—almost manically jaunty.

"London Bridge Is Falling Down."

There was more laughter, and a few men actually started to sing along. But the recital didn't last long. One quick run-through of the song and Keys was done. He dragged his stool back around to his resting spot, slumped against the piano, and closed his eyes.

As floor shows go, it was pretty pathetic. Certainly, the Bella Union and the other big concert saloons had nothing to fear from this place. Yet the performance brought down the house: Men were still clapping and stomping their feet even as the geezer slipped back into his slumber.

I glanced toward the end of the bar, thinking I might share a little eye-roll or shrug with my brother. But there was nothing to share . . . because there was no one to share it with.

Old Red was gone.

Johnny was leaning over to share a whispered word with the barman, and I could finally see around his stout frame just fine. Yet all I saw was wall. I jerked my head this way and that, searching the rest of the room. In vain.

It had been all of a minute since I'd turned to watch Keys tickle the ivories (or give them a good beating, more like), and in that time Old Red had left somehow. Yet he couldn't have gone out the front door without walking right past me, and the back door was over by the piano—I'd have seen him leave thataway, too.

Now, my brother can be cantankerous, and I'll admit there have been moments I wished he'd just go away. But never had I ever dreamed he might actually up and do it—simply vanish without so much as a puff of smoke. So sudden was his disappearance, in fact, that I might have doubted my own sanity, worrying that this "Gustav" was a figment of my imagination much as my crazy Uncle Franz once befriended a potato he addressed as *"Herr Berenson."*

I quickly spotted proof that I wasn't loco, though—and that something foul was afoot.

When I glanced back where Old Red had been standing, I noticed that there were two half-full glasses on the bar next to big, burly Johnny. The barkeep picked one up, emptied it out beneath the bar, then began giving the glass a vigorous spit-shine with a filthy rag.

If my brother had heard the call of nature and slipped off to the w.c. (or, given the character of the place, the back alley), why would the bartender be cleaning out his glass? And if Gustav had simply

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elected to leave, why wouldn't he have collected me on the way out?

Which meant Old Red was gone, but he hadn't left. He'd been *taken*.

I looked down at the bartender's feet, leaning forward as far as I could without tipping head over heels and landing atop his brogans. Unlikely as it was, I had to make sure Gustav wasn't down there behind the bar trussed up like a beef ready for the brand.

He wasn't, of course. All I saw was a slop bucket, what looked like a tap handle (perhaps for the secret stock of *drinkable* beer squirreled away for specially favored patrons), boxes filled with assorted bottles, and—good information to have—a short-barreled shotgun just like Cowboy Mag's. It must be a regulation in *The Barkeeper's Handbook*, right between "Water down whiskey" and "No credit to cowboys": "Keep scattergun under bar."

The bartender caught me gaping his way and shot me a glower so sour he could have poured it out and sold it as lemonade.

I forced myself to smile.

"Don't worry about me, mister—I learned my lesson." I picked up my beer and splashed half of it over my tonsils. "Glug glug glug, right?"

The barman didn't bother responding, which was fine by me. What I needed right then was to be ignored. I had me some heavy-duty thinking to do . . . *fast*.

Of course, the person best suited to bust such a puzzle was Old Red himself, and I couldn't very well consult with him on his own kidnapping. And turning to the law wasn't an option. The Barbary Coast's a precarious place for policemen, and they usually don't go there at all except in squads of ten or more. I'd probably walk a dozen blocks before I saw a single cop.

Yet there was someone I could turn to, I realized, though he wasn't on hand, either: Mr. Sherlock Holmes. True, Gustav was the expert on Holmes, but he only knew of the man through me—I read him John Watson's tales of the great detective each and every night. Whatever my brother had heard about deducifying, I'd heard, too. It was just a matter of putting it to work.

I closed my eyes and dredged up Old Red's favorite Holmes quotes.

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence."

Useless.

"Little things are infinitely the most important."

Useless.

"There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."

Useless . . . and pretty danged silly.

"When you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Which might lead me to conclude that—as my brother could not have flown through the ceiling or dug down through the floorboards—Johnny and the bartender must have *eaten him* while I had my back turned.

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Useless useless useless.

Unless . . .

I *had* turned my back, hadn't I? And why? To watch a sorry old sot flail away at a piano—because the barkeep told him to.

Keys's little routine might have been a distraction. But a distraction from what? He hadn't blocked anyone's view of either door. He'd just made a lot of noise.

So maybe it wasn't the sight of something he was covering up so much as the sound. The opening of a hidden door, perhaps, or the workings of some secret mechanism.

"Exclude the impossible," Holmes had said. All right. If my brother hadn't been taken out to the left or the right, that left only up or down. Maybe one wasn't so impossible after all.

I threw back my head to guzzle the last of my beer—and get a peek up at the ceiling over the spot where Gustav had been standing. There was nothing to see but rafters and cobwebs.

I put down my glass and dug a dime from my pocket.

"Shot of rye for the road," I said to the bartender. Then "Dagnabbit" as I let the coin slip betwixt my fingers. After bending down to retrieve my money, I took a good look at the floor at the far end of the bar.

When I stood up again, I was grinning—and gritting my teeth.

"Here you go, my good sir," I said with as much cheer as I could muster considering how much I wanted to pop off the barman's head like the cork from a bottle. I dropped the dime in front of him. "And you'll see no sippin' from me this time, I promise you."

Silent, scowling, the bartender thumped down a shot glass and sloshed it full of liquid the color of tobacco juice. Which was pretty much what it tasted like, too.

I tossed it down with one swiping swig and set the glass back on the bar.

"Keep the change."

I got no thanks. The barkeep just snatched up my shot glass, gave it a single swipe with his ratty little rag, and set it aside, ready for the next paying customer. He was drifting back toward his big buddy Johnny as I turned to go.

Heading for the door, I kept myself to an easy amble when what I really wanted to do was dash. It was torture not glancing back to see if Johnny and the barman were watching me—and maybe noticing the wisps of short-cropped cherry-red hair peeking out from under my bowler. But if little things *are* the most important, then even such a trifling show of nerves might be all it would take to arouse suspicion . . . and quash what slight chance I had of saving my brother.

I finally knew where he was, and I couldn't very well get there myself with a bucketload of buckshot in my back.

I managed to keep my gaze straight ahead.

The sunshine was blinding-bright when I stepped outside, but a

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few blinks and the ink spots disappeared. I set off down the street still keeping myself to a mosey, just in case.

Before I reached the first corner, though, I finally allowed myself that look over the shoulder. I saw drunks, chippies, and rowdies aplenty, but no sign of Johnny or the barman.

I spun around and hustled back toward the deadfall.

I didn't go inside again, though. Instead, I turned down a narrow alley that ran along the side of the saloon. A dozen quick strides brought me to an angled doorway jutting out from the building—the entrance to a storm cellar. I bent down and gave the rickety twin doors a cautious tug.

Locked. Bolted from the inside.

I paused to consider my options . . . and sighed when I realized how bad the best one stunk.

I knocked. Lightly, politely at first, then rougher when I remembered that nobody did anything politely in the Barbary Coast.

"Who is it?" a man called out from down below.

I chanced an answer, praying it didn't call for a brogue or falsetto or some other giveaway trait.

"Johnny."

"Already?" Muffled, shuffling footsteps drew closer to the door. "Bit early, ain't it?"

"So?" I grunted, hoping Johnny didn't have a lisp.

The doors rattled.

I stepped back, rattled myself but knowing there was but one way to proceed.

"It's just that it ain't dark yet . . ." the man said.

The doors began to swing open.

" . . . and we've only got four *EEP!*"

By the time he saw my face, my kick had almost reached his.

As Old Red is fond of pointing out, I manage to put my foot in my mouth pretty regular-like. This was the first time I'd ever put it in someone else's, though. It didn't go in far, of course. Just enough to send the man flying back into the cellar minus his front teeth.

I jumped down after him, giving him a toe to the stomach twice before he could so much as let out his first groan. He was a scrawny, grubby little fellow, and I might've felt bad about treating him so rough if not for what I spied piled up in the shadows farther back in the basement.

Men. Four of them, splayed out on a rotten old mattress directly below the lines I'd noticed in the saloon floor—the trapdoor. From underneath, I could see the wooden slat that pulled out to drop it open and the jointed rods leading up through the ceiling, perhaps to that extra beer tap tucked away beneath the bar.

I didn't care about the *how* just then, though. It was the *who* that truly troubled me, for stretched out atop that mound of men was my brother, his body as limp and lifeless as the barman's rag.

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I glowered down at the little fellow I'd just put the boot to and brought my foot up again without so much as thinking to do it. I can't even say what thoughts were in my head at that moment. It's as if there were no thoughts at all, just an explosion of red and black and a great, awful noise like the scream of a steam whistle. I'm not sure what I was about to do—stomp the poor pipsqueak to a pulp, I suppose. Certainly, that's what *he* assumed.

"No, mishter! Shtop!" he cried out, mush-mouthed with blood. "They ain't dead! I work for the Chicken!"

I froze with one foot hovering over the man's face, wondering if my first kick hadn't knocked something lose in his head.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"The Chicken—the *Shanghai* Chicken! Johnny Devine! Thish ish hish plashe! We're crimpsh, not killersh!"

I set my foot back down on the dirt floor.

"Crimps?"

The word tickled a memory of newspaper and magazine articles I'd read about the Coast. "Shanghai," too.

"You mean you aimed to sell them fellers off to crew sea ships?"

The little man nodded. "Jusht got an order from a Norwegian whaler. A dozen men jumped ship the shecond they made port, and they need replashementsh."

I stared hard at Gustav and the men beneath him, noticing only now the slight up-down of their chests and the raspy sound of ragged breathing.

"We jusht drug 'em. Laudanum in their drinksh. They wake up later with headachesh, that'sh all."

"Yeah, sure," I said, starting toward my brother. "Wake up on some leaky tub in the middle of the Pacific, you mean."

As I drew closer to the Chicken's victims, I noticed another pile in a darkened corner beyond them—a heap of a good two dozen *hats*, with my brother's white Stetson up top like the snowcap on a mountain.

Then I saw the swollen purple bump on Gustav's forehead. Those headaches weren't brought on by laudanum alone.

I spun around just as the little crimp staggered to his feet and started toward me with his blackjack raised high.

"Thank you, friend," I said. "Now I don't have to feel bad about *this*."

"*This*" being a swift kick to the unmentionables followed by a roundhouse that flattened the man's nose and blew out his candle.

I left the crimp lying in Old Red's spot atop the stack of soon-to-be sailors. I wasn't happy about leaving those other fellows to the Chicken's not-so-tender mercies, but even so large a man as me can only manage so much dead weight at once, and acts of charity would only get us shanghaied all over again . . . or worse.

I toted Gustav home draped over my back, something that surely would've aroused a touch of curiosity just about anywhere else. This being the Barbary Coast, though, all I got was the occasional

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wisecrack along the lines of "Good thing *one* of you can handle his liquor!" By the time we were back in our room at the Cowboy's Rest, Old Red was starting to stir.

"You all right, Brother?" I asked once I had him stretched out on our bed.

Gustav's eyelids fluttered, then went wide. He pushed himself up to a sit, one hand pressed to his head.

"What the h__ are we doin' *here?*" he groaned.

That's right: "What the h__ are we doin' here?" Not "Thank you, Brother." Not "How'd you find me?" Not "I owe you my eternal gratitude and will never give you guff again so long as I shall live."

"What are we doin'?" I said. "Well, you are sittin' up when you should be lyin' down. And me, I'm thinkin' I liked you better unconscious."

Old Red waved a limp hand at the war bags we kept piled up in the corner.

"Best get those packed up quick. We gotta go."

I started to ask "Why?" but didn't even make it through the "Wh—"

"Oh," I said. And I set to packing.

Not five minutes later, I was helping Gustav hobble down the stairs. Our clomping drew Cowboy Mag from her barroom.

"How about a little hair of the dog, boys?" she asked, friendly as can be—until she noticed the bags I was dragging behind us. Lickety-split, her smile spun around into a frown.

"Ain't no dog done my brother like this. It was a Chicken . . . and a snake," I said. "Speakin' of which, I been tryin' to remember—how'd you say you got your nickname again?"

Cowboy Mag planted herself before the door. With her plump arms and legs akimbo, she made quite a formidable roadblock.

"Don't think you're leavin' without settlin' up with me first."

"We wouldn't dream of it," Old Red said, his voice still hoarse and trembly. He gave me a pat on the back. "Brother, would you mind?"

"Certainly not."

And I propped him up against the wall, put down our bags, and truly settled accounts with ol' Mag.

Now, for the record, let me state that I have never struck a lady, and I never will.

Let me add, however, one obvious and important fact: Cowboy Mag was no lady.

With best wishes of (and hopes for) publishing success,
O. A. Amlingmeyer

The Cosmopolitan House (Hotel)
Oakland, Calif.
August 8, 1893 ●

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THE GRAY LADY

by David A. Knadler

"She was staring at us and we ran," the girl said. "Then I came back to look through the window and she was gone."

Deputy Sheriff John Ennis wanted these kids gone, too. He had a long list of things to do this afternoon, including a talk at the high school for which he was ill prepared. He cleared his throat.

"So: You two entered a private residence. You saw someone at the stairs. You bugged out without so much as a hello—possibly because you'd been caught breaking and entering. Then you decided to peep through the window, but this time couldn't see anybody."

David Knadler grew up in rural Montana and is a career journalist who has worked for several daily newspapers including the *Kansas City Star* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Now a resident of Wichita, Kansas, he's working on a novel featuring the reluctant lawman-hero of this new story, John Ennis. This is the author's fifth story for *EQMM*, and Ennis has featured in all of them.

The girl, Laurel Hogue, shook her head firmly. "We weren't breaking and entering. The house is vacant. We're only telling you about it because this old guy next-door saw us and said he was calling the cops. We weren't doing anything wrong. And this has happened before. Last year, when I was a sophomore. Josh and I wanted to investigate."

"You've broken in before?"

"I *told* you, it wasn't locked. That house, it's empty a lot of the time. It has a reputation. Last Halloween, my sister Heather and some friends, they were talking about the Gray Lady and snuck over there one night. They all swore they saw her!"

"Who's the Gray Lady?"

Now the boy, Josh Randa, spoke up. He had trouble making eye contact. "Some of the kids think she's a ghost. They talk about it sometimes. I always thought it was B.S., but now . . ."

"A ghost," Ennis said. He smiled.

Laurel's face reddened. It wasn't embarrassment.

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"You think we grew up on too many *Scooby-Doo* reruns, right? Just stupid kids. Well, this isn't funny. I saw something. It was scary; there was this feeling about it, very cold and . . ." She saw Ennis scanning the ceiling and stood abruptly. "Oh God, just forget it. Come on, Josh. I think we're cutting into the deputy's donut break."

Josh got to his feet with an apologetic little smile. "Well, uh, thanks."

"Oh, right," Laurel said. "Thanks for nothing."

Ennis, who was not on break and didn't like donuts, watched them go: the tentative slacker in the baggy pants, the goth girl with her short red hair and shorter skirt. He remembered himself at that age and slightly regretted that he'd taken such a dismissive tone. He didn't mind a good ghost story, really. It probably wouldn't have hurt to play along just a little.

Larry Swan, who taught English and creative writing at Kootenai County High School, laughed when Ennis mentioned his interview with the two students.

"Of course I've heard of her," he said. "Every year I get a dreadful story or two about the Gray Lady. The last involved a spectral chainsaw."

They were standing in the high-school parking lot. Ennis had been asked to speak to the faculty about recognizing drug use among students. It had not gone particularly well. After hearing him drone on for 45 minutes, most of the teachers looked as if they themselves had been abusing barbiturates. Swan found that amusing too.

"By the way, next time I have trouble sleeping at night, I'll know who to call. You should work some levity into your routine."

Ennis didn't mention that his carefully crafted laugh lines had sunk without a ripple in the vast silence of the faculty lounge. The important thing was, the ordeal was over.

"Thanks for the tip. About those kids, I was probably a little short with them. I thought they were pulling my chain."

Swan unlocked his convertible. "Ah, John, your Philadelphia cynicism is boundless. Of course, it's possible they *were* pulling your chain, this close to Halloween. But I know those two. I'm sure they meant no harm."

"The house has a 'reputation,' huh? I guess every town has one."

"Yes, it seems to fill some primal need, doesn't it? Where life lacks darkness and mystery, we must create it. But to give the kids credit, the place does have at least a slight whiff of . . . something. Beyond being merely vacant. I understand there was a suicide at some point." He shrugged. "Even small tragedies can grow into legends, given time. All it takes is a bit of the unknown. And a fair amount of retelling."

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"What's the unknown part?"

Swan gave him a long-suffering look. "If I knew, it wouldn't be unknown, would it?" He tossed his briefcase on the passenger seat and got in the car. "One of my students mentioned something about it. Last year. I think she had done some research for a short story . . ." He brightened. "You know, I think it was the same girl you spoke with today: Laurel Hogue."

"Ah."

"Again with the cynicism. Weren't you ever young, John?"

The house at 221 Linda looked more cursed than haunted: cursed by a crappy location and years of neglectful tenants. It was hard by the Montana Rail Link tracks and definitely on the wrong side of them. The weedy lawn was long dead; the misshapen little pine by the mailbox soon would be. Beside it, the sign for Shining Mountains Realty creaked and swayed in the October wind.

Not exactly Hill House, Ennis thought. Outwardly, it resembled every other place in this little neighborhood known as the Belker Addition: single level, disintegrating carport, clapboard siding in dreary beige. All this one lacked was a couple of junk cars out front. Why had the kids of Worland decided this would be the haunted one? There were no deserted Gothic mansions in the area, but still . . .

Well, he'd been mildly curious to see it. If a place had a "reputation," however unearned, sooner or later it would probably figure in some youth activity involving the use of illicit substances. Ennis sighed. And when it did, Worland's stalwart defender against that sort of thing—that would be him—would have the lay of the land.

Down the rutted street, a maroon Honda Accord was approaching, slowly maneuvering through a minefield of potholes. It stopped opposite him. He began to pull out, but the thin blond woman driving caught his eye and waved both hands. She wore a nervous smile as both their windows slid down.

"Hi! Say, could I ask you a really big favor?"

Ennis looked at his watch. "Sure."

"I need to run in here a minute? I was just wondering if, well, if you'd mind waiting while I do? I promise it'll be quick."

He got out of the Blazer and waited for the woman to hurry across the street. Behind her, the Accord beeped and its lights flashed. People in Worland liked to say it was the kind of town where you didn't have to lock your car, but a lot of people seemed to anyway.

"This is so nice of you. I'm Libby. Libby Howell?" She extended a manicured hand. The wind gusted and Ennis grabbed for his hat; her lacquered hair was unaffected. He caught the scent of perfume and hair spray, both liberally applied. "I'm with Shining Mountains? I know this is strange, but since you're here I'd just feel

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better if . . ." Her voice trailed off as she looked over Ennis's shoulder. "I don't know, I just get an odd feeling being in there by myself."

He followed her gaze. Out here in the cold the house seemed even drearier than it had from the car. Libby Howell must be new to the agency, he thought, to be the one stuck trying to move listings like this.

"I just need to do a quick check on a couple of things," she said. "Would you like to come in and look? As long as you're here? You know, the seller is very motivated on this one."

Ennis was about to demur, but he caught a slight note of desperation in her voice.

"Okay, just for a minute."

He followed her up the crumbling walk and waited while she fumbled with a ring of keys. The lock box resisted her initial efforts and she muttered a curse. When it finally yielded, she took the keys and inserted one in the battered doorknob. Before she could turn it, the door slipped open on its own. She blinked and swore again.

"This is the third time," she said. "I keep locking it and I keep finding it unlocked. See, it's things like that."

"Probably just needs to be adjusted."

She gave him a dubious smile. "Yes, I'm sure that's it. I guess I'll have to get it looked at. The owner is out of state. Every time his tenants move out, he fixes it up and tries to sell it."

He followed her inside. The door opened directly onto a square of gray linoleum surrounded by new tan carpet: he guessed this was the living room. The place was freezing. The chemical scent of the carpet and fresh paint couldn't quite mask the aroma of vacancy dust in dead air, coagulated drains, old cigarette smoke, perhaps the dark blush of mold in some unseen corner. Ennis, never particularly ebullient, felt a sudden decline in his mood. Like a cheap motel room, the place seemed to radiate hopelessness.

Libby Howell only wrinkled her nose. "I should probably leave a window open or something, but then you worry about the pipes. And vandals."

"Has that been a problem?"

"No, not really. Not yet. The last time I came here the door was wide open, but nobody had been in, that I could tell."

Ennis decided not to tell her about the two students and their paranormal investigations.

"I just have to check the thermostat." She walked across the living room, her high-heeled boots leaving sharp imprints in the new carpet. Ennis noted other faint depressions, veering toward the basement stairs and stopping in the middle of the room.

Libby peered at the thermostat and gave an exasperated sigh.

"Look! I set it at fifty-five degrees, to keep the pipes from freezing, but it's so cold in here! That's just weird!"

Her breath was visible as she spoke. She was right—it was

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nowhere near 55 degrees. Libby clutched her arms around her thin leather coat. "God, this house. I guess I should check the furnace?"

She looked toward the basement stairs but made no move toward them. Ennis understood that she was waiting for a gallant gesture.

"Would you like me to have a look?"

"Would you? That would be super."

The basement was smaller than he expected. Someone had made a half-hearted attempt at finishing what might optimistically be called the family room, a windowless space about 12 feet by 16. On the far wall, some major flaws in the Sheetrock were plainly visible beneath the fresh coat of beige paint. The room was lit by a cheap fluorescent fixture that flickered intermittently. Some family room, Ennis thought. He had seen homier parking garages.

"Partial basement," Libby said. "That's another drawback. The rest of the houses in the neighborhood have full basements; I don't know what the builder could have been thinking. The furnace is in here."

A door off the family room stood open. The furnace burners were lit; the loud fan exhaled lukewarm air into the room. Ever chivalrous, Ennis checked the filters. They seemed fine too. He looked at the realtor and shrugged.

He was glad to get outside in the cold air. Libby Howell pulled the door shut and insisted Ennis try the lock. It seemed secure. She smiled and touched his sleeve as he got into the Blazer.

"Thanks so much. You must think I'm just a worrywart. I don't know what it is about that place."

Ennis didn't know either. But he didn't think she'd be selling it soon.

Ennis contemplated the clutch of black-clad girls smoking cigarettes outside Ray's Bistro, across from the high school. He was thinking of his own high-school days, the time when such girls might smile when he passed them in the hall, or sat next to them in class, or asked them to dance. Now, of course, middle age had made him a different species—perhaps a different genus. He might as well be a house plant for all the smiles he'd get now.

Among the girls was Laurel Hogue. She chanced to look his way, then frowned and leaned past a girlfriend to look again. He waved her over. The other girls laughed as she warily crossed the street. Ennis ran the window down.

"I had a look at your haunted house," he said.

She had done her small mouth in lipstick that was almost black. She took a careless drag of her cigarette and looked away, radiating boredom. She was quite pretty, even if Ennis wasn't sure about the little silver ring she wore in one nostril.

"How brave. Did you go inside?"

"Yes. With the realtor. I'm thinking of buying it."

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This got her attention. He smiled.

"Kidding. I wanted to see if you guys did any damage."

"I told you, the door was open."

"So it was. But I'd recommend you not try another expedition. If that neighbor gets around to reporting it, I might have to do something about it."

"Whatever. You think we made it up, don't you?"

"Did you?"

She tossed her cigarette away and brushed hair from her eyes.

"I saw her."

"The Gray Lady."

"Look. Officer. Sheriff. What do they call you anyway? You can think what you want. This isn't something I made up to amuse you, or the idiots in this school. That house is haunted. And I know why."

"A teacher of yours mentioned something about a suicide."

"You mean Mr. Swan? Yes, there was a suicide." She leaned closer. "But I think there was something else: I think there was also a murder."

She was looking him in the eye when she said it. She didn't smile and she didn't blink. Now she had *his* attention.

The girl agreed to speak to him after school at Cafe Sunshine, which was across the street from the Town Hall. Ennis told her to bring Josh along—it was a small town, and there was no point in inciting gossip by being seen having coffee alone with an underage girl.

Josh clearly didn't want to be there, but Ennis had the feeling the kid was going to be doing her bidding as long as she kept him around. Laurel slid in next to her boyfriend. She produced a pack of Marlboros and lit one, ignoring the signs and the waitress's concerned look.

"So, what do you want to know?"

"You mentioned a murder," Ennis said.

Laurel took a deep drag and exhaled theatrically. "I don't have any proof, if that's what you want. Most of what I know about it comes from my mom. But it's true. It has to be."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"First I want to show you this." She took a weathered high-school yearbook from her bag and slid it across the table: Worland Wolves, class of '74. She opened it at a bookmark and pointed to a picture halfway down the page.

"That's Sophie Morigeau. She was my mom's best friend when they were in high school."

The plain-looking girl wore an odd smile and huge glasses. Like about two-thirds of the other sophomore girls pictured, her lank hair was parted in the middle and hung straight to her shoulders.

"Sophie and her folks lived in that house. The one on Linda. The

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mother's name was Lisette and I don't know the dad's name. My mom's family was living in the same neighborhood then, Belker."

Ennis nodded.

"Sophie told Mom she was being abused at home. Bad. Her parents both drank a lot, I guess. She'd come to school with all kinds of bruises, sometimes cuts. Once she showed Mom some cigarette burns on her back. But she always made Mom promise not to tell."

Josh didn't look up. He was folding a napkin into a compact square. He seemed to have heard the story before.

Laurel leaned forward. "Then one day, Sophie quit coming to school. I mean just stopped. My mom would call and Lisette would grab the phone out of Sophie's hands. Finally she told Mom to quit calling, She said Sophie had gone to live with her dad and wouldn't be back. That's what she told the school, too."

"Maybe that's what happened," Ennis said.

Laurel shook her head. "Except a few years later, my mom ran into the dad, this Mr. Morigeau. It was in a bar, down in Kalispell. This was after she quit school. My mom, uh, she had kind of a drinking problem, too. Anyway, she asked about Sophie. And the dad just looked at her and said he hadn't seen Sophie since he walked out. He said Lisette wouldn't allow it.

"Anyway, Mom never saw Sophie again. But she knew Lisette had lied. And she thought there was only one reason for a lie like that."

Josh decided not to wait for the punch line. "Killed her own daughter," he said.

Ennis wasn't quite ready to make the same leap. "Or ran away, more likely. Your mom ever talk to the cops?"

Laurel gave him a look. "Didn't do any good. She said she talked to a sheriff once and he blew her off. I mean, I guess it didn't help that she was always drinking and everybody just thought . . . well, nobody pays attention to a drunk. And it wasn't long after that she heard about Lisette killing herself. Right there in that house. So I guess she thought there was no point."

"Think your mother would like to talk to me about it now?"

Josh reddened and concentrated on the napkin. Laurel stabbed the cigarette out.

"I'm sure she'd love to. Except she's dead."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She shrugged, but wouldn't look at him.

"Two years ago. Like I said, she was an alcoholic. But it wasn't the drinking. It was breast cancer." She took a deep breath. "Anyway, that's the story. I think Lisette Morigeau killed her daughter and then killed herself."

She forced a little smile. "Think that's enough to haunt a house?"

Ennis considered the tale: A collection of secondhand details, originating with a longtime alcoholic and amplified through a gen-

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eration of slumber parties. But the girl's interest seemed genuine, more than just a desire to spice up a dreary autumn in Worland. Maybe it was the link to her dead mother, a question of closure. Or maybe she wanted to right an old wrong against a girl her own age.

"Tell you what: I'll look into it." He slid out of the booth, left a five on the table. "As soon as I have time. I'll let you know what I find out."

A call later that afternoon took him back to the Belker Addition: Two doors down from 221 Linda a woman was threatening to shoot her neighbor's barking pit bull, if not the neighbor himself. It took him most of an hour to establish a tenuous truce, and he returned wearily to his vehicle. It was time to call it a day.

He was getting in when the wind gusted. He grabbed for his hat too late and cursed as it bounded up the street, past the realty sign at 221 Linda. It came to rest against the board fence separating the house from the one next door.

Crossing the yard, Ennis saw the upper half of a gray head watching him from across the fence. He lifted a hand in greeting. The guy didn't wave back.

A raspy voice called out, "You again? What the hell's going on over there?"

Ennis brushed off the hat and clamped it down tight. The fence concealed all but the guy's wispy hair, wrinkled forehead, and pale blue eyes.

"You live here?"

"No, I'm enjoying the goddamn view. Of course I live here. What're you doing?"

Ennis became annoyed. "Nothing. See you around."

"Somebody file a complaint? I know them damned kids have been breaking in there."

"You the one who caught them over here?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "I'm getting tired of the little shits. Trespassing. They keep it up, somebody's going to get hurt."

Ennis was getting tired of talking to half a face. He walked around the end of the fence to the neighbor's front gate. The old man was carrying an oxygen tank connected to a nasal breathing tube slung over his ears. His eyes widened and he sidled toward his house as Ennis came across the yard.

"I don't want to hear about anybody getting hurt," Ennis said.

"Yeah? They better stay off private property, then."

"You own the place?"

"No, do you? I'm a concerned citizen. Been here since this neighborhood was built. Somebody's got to keep an eye on things." A sneer crept into his voice. "Damn sure the law around here won't."

"If you've been here that long, you know why kids come around."

"Oh yeah, it's haunted, right?" The old man spat. "That's bullshit.

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I knew the people who lived there. And I know kids. Little bastards, just looking for a place to diddle."

"What's your name?"

"What's it to you?" Ennis gave the man a look; he edged closer to his porch. "Gardner. Charles Gardner. Not that it's any of your business."

"You knew the Morigeaus?"

The name seemed to surprise him. He licked his lips and looked away.

"Yeah, I knew 'em," he said. "He wasn't worth a damn. Carpenter, worked on the dam project. Little pissant, I had to clean his clock once. I got on okay with the missus, though."

"You remember a daughter?"

Gardner's eyes shifted between Ennis and his front steps.

"Who? Oh. Yeah, I guess maybe there was a kid. Now that you mention it."

"You know what became of her?"

The old man coughed. He dredged up phlegm from deep within his ruined lungs and spat. "Ran off. Just like her old man. That's what I heard. Left her mom all alone. It was me found Lisette hanging down there, couple years after. That was a sweet sight, let me tell you."

Gardner slapped at his shirt pocket and withdrew a pack of Camels.

"Couldn't stand living alone, I guess." He shook out a cigarette and took it in his mouth. "Got a light?"

"No. When's the last time you saw the daughter?"

"I don't know. And I don't give a shit. Long time ago. Now it's cold and I gotta get back inside."

Ennis watched Gardner mount the front steps. The old man turned and gave him a smile that might have looked strange even without the oxygen tube below his beak and the cigarette bobbing below that.

Ennis didn't smile back. The old man chuckled and went back inside.

Ennis's next day off wasn't until Thursday. He spent the first part of it in a dim alcove of the Kootenai County Courthouse, examining the few official details concerning the death of Lisette Morigeau, 42. It seemed Laurel Hogue's mother and the old man next-door had gotten at least that part of the story right.

The woman had been found in the basement of her Worland home on the afternoon of October 30, 1976. The coroner thought the actual death had occurred three days earlier. A neighbor had reported finding the front door open in freezing weather. A cat mewling in the basement had led him to the body.

There was a heavy-duty extension cord around the woman's

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neck, secured to a floor joist above. It made the cause of death self-evident: asphyxiation by hanging. The coroner's notes suggested Lisette had entertained second thoughts at precisely the moment it became too late to do so: there were abrasions on her neck and fingernails on both hands were damaged. That wasn't uncommon in such suicides, Ennis knew; he had seen a couple like that during his days with the force in Philadelphia. He pictured the woman clawing at the cord as the squalid little basement around her faded to black. He shook his head. It seemed a particularly hellish way to check out.

Returning the records, Ennis asked about the coroner who had signed the certificate, Huntley Collins. The obese woman at the counter pleasantly informed him that Mr. Collins had succumbed to a heart attack in 1998.

He had expected as much, three decades after the fact, but it left him little else to do in Libby after the hour-long drive from Worland. Outside the courthouse, the iron-gray sky seemed low enough to touch and it smelled like snow. He considered heading home, but decided to stop off first at the *Northwest News.* It called itself the newspaper of record in Kootenai County—maybe it had published an obituary for Lisette Morigeau.

It took him two hours to find it. Not because of any shortcomings in the newspaper's microfiche archive, but because he kept getting sidetracked by the history of 1976 that flowed across the screen: President Gerald Ford planning to attend the dedication of Libby Dam, which had created the long, useless reservoir that now stretched between Libby and Worland. The Montana Legislature legalizing Keno—what a great leap forward that had been. Ennis tried to imagine the state without the seedy casinos that now infested every bar and restaurant.

He also found himself lingering over the movie ads of that year: *Rocky. Marathon Man. The Omen.* It was only when he saw the ad for *Carrie,* opening in September at the Orpheus Theater in Libby, that he remembered Lisette Morigeau.

The obituary ran on November 4, a Thursday. It was low on the page and was accompanied by a small picture of the deceased. Ennis supposed it had been cropped from a snapshot. Lisette Morigeau's eyes were little more than pinpoints in shadow; she was not smiling. The obituary consisted of five sentences. It was the fourth that interested Ennis the most: "She is survived by a daughter, Sophia."

He pondered that on the drive back to Worland. It was dark and snow swirled in the headlights. *Survived by a daughter.* The Morigeaus didn't seem like a particularly close-knit family; maybe that detail had been a supposition, supplied to the funeral home by a relative who believed the girl had been sent to live with her father. It was probably more likely that Sophie *had* moved elsewhere, or had simply run away. If the account of Laurel's mother

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was anywhere close to the truth, she had good reason to go.

If so, where was she now? Ennis divided his attention between that question and the more immediate problem of keeping his six-year-old Subaru between the ditches. This highway could be tricky in good weather; now it was getting slick. As he drove, white crosses occasionally materialized in his headlights before slipping past like silent wraiths. The State of Montana used them to mark the sites of fatal accidents on state highways. There were 17 between here and home; Ennis had counted. Another pair loomed up and he let the car slow. The curve almost doubled back on itself before angling down toward the black reservoir. He kept both hands on the wheel and resisted the urge to touch the brakes. All the while wondering: What became of Sophie?

It seemed much later than it was when Ennis got back to Worland: 9 P.M.—still early enough to grab some dinner. He didn't feel like returning to his trailer at Pine View Court just yet.

There were only three cars in the parking lot at Pizza Station; one of them was a maroon Accord. Libby Howell was seated by herself in the corner, a small pitcher of beer and half a small pizza before her. She was staring moodily out the window, but brightened and waved him over when he walked in.

"Would you like some? It's a veggie combo; I can't finish all of it."

Ennis had been thinking along the lines of the meat lovers' special. "That's okay, I'll just . . ."

"At least help me finish this pitcher. I'll get another glass." She was off to the counter before Ennis could protest. He sat down, leaving his coat on.

Libby set the glass before him. She looked a bit haggard as she sat down. "I'm celebrating," she said. The brittle cheeriness in her tone was not infectious.

"Business is good?"

"Hardly. No, I'm just happy to have lost my least-favorite listing. You know the house."

"It's off the market?"

"Probably my fault. I called the owner about the lock and he got kind of pissy and then one thing led to another and, *voila!*—my sign no longer graces the front lawn of 221 Linda."

Ennis took a sip of beer. Light beer, so light it was tasteless. "Sorry it didn't work out."

"Oh, don't be." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I hated that house. Just hated it. And just between you and me, I am now prepared to say it's haunted."

Ennis began to suspect this was not Libby's first pitcher of beer. "Really? Why?"

"Besides the ghost, you mean?" She tried to laugh, but it came out as kind of a choking sound. "I saw it, John. Can I call you John?

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I saw something. Last night, when I went down to collect the lock box, I thought I'd do a quick walk-through, just so the owner couldn't come back on me later."

She sipped nervously at her beer. "I just had this strong feeling that somebody was in the house with me, you know? It was eerie. I collected the cards and the info sheets on the counter and I felt someone watching me. I felt it so strongly I looked around." Libby swallowed hard.

"And there she was."

"She."

"There was somebody standing there! At the top of the stairs. In gray, a dress or something. She looked at me."

Libby was looking into his eyes. Ennis decided the fear there was real. He waited a few seconds before clearing his throat.

"Well, it could have been . . ."

"I know what you're going to say. Some kid, having fun before Halloween. Or just my imagination in poor lighting. But trust me. If you had been there . . ."

He looked at his beer. She smiled wanly. "I know, crazy woman, right? I guess I should ask you not to mention this to anyone else. That old neighbor next-door, he probably thinks I'm crazy too. I saw him watching from his side window when I ran out of there."

Ennis wanted to reassure her, tell her he believed her, but in fact he didn't. The world was full of people who wanted to see ghosts. It wasn't surprising when their imaginations obliged. He could think of nothing to say. Libby sighed and drained her glass. "Sorry. I just thought . . . Well, at least that damned house is not my problem anymore, right?" She stood to go. "I honestly don't think it'll ever sell. If it were up to me, I'd just rip it down."

Ennis was the last to leave the Pizza Station. It was getting late. The snow had stopped but the wind still gusted and sighed through the darkened town. It was time to go home.

Instead, he found himself driving through town and across the railroad tracks. He took the right turn down Linda Street. There was the house; the front window faintly illuminated from somewhere within. Libby Howell's sign was gone. Somehow the place looked even more desolate because of it. He parked out front. In the dead of night, and knowing what he now knew of its past, he supposed he could understand how kids might call it haunted.

As he watched, a faint thread of light appeared at the door and he realized it had come open. Ennis shook his head. Somebody should really get that thing fixed. He got out of the Subaru with his big Maglite and approached the house.

The door stood open about half an inch. Ennis pushed it wider and stepped through. He stood on the linoleum entry and listened. Maybe another contingent of teen ghost hunters had arrived. The

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furnace was going downstairs, but he could hear no other sound.

He found his gaze drawn to the top of the basement stairs. They were barely visible and he turned on the flashlight. There was no sign anyone had stood there recently, although faint depressions did suggest Libby Howell's path from the front door to the kitchen. He was considering this when he heard a faint sound downstairs. A scrape, like a chair against a concrete floor.

So: Maybe Laurel and Josh had returned for another thrill. He hoped not. She seemed a troubled girl and he seemed merely hapless; he wasn't in the mood to reprimand them.

He couldn't locate a light switch at the top of the stairs. He followed his flashlight beam down the steps, pausing again to listen. Nothing. He reached the landing and played the beam around the small basement room. The furnace kicked off; he flicked the beam in that direction. Nothing there but naked pipes along the wall, the bulk of the furnace cloaked in shadow. It made a clicking noise as it cooled.

Now the silence seemed vast. Ennis caught a flicker of movement at the corner of his eye. He turned quickly, but his flashlight found only the blank concrete wall. A reflection, then. So why the sudden tingling at the back of his scalp?

He thought of the thirty-year-old death certificate he had seen that afternoon. Today was October 27. According to the Kootenai County coroner, it was the date of Lisette Morigeau's death. He realized he was probably standing exactly where it had occurred. He moved farther out into the room, now aware of his own heart beating. If ghosts existed, Ennis thought, this would be the time and place he might expect to see one.

At the door to the furnace room he found a light switch and flipped it on. The fluorescent fixture snapped and hummed; a sickly flickering light filled the room. Ennis looked around.

The wall next to the stairs landing was bare concrete; part of the foundation. A new coat of paint couldn't hide the cracks that angled from ceiling to floor like bolts of black lightning. The wall at the end of the room was clad in Sheetrock, inexpertly installed, the joint tape and mud still visible beneath layers of paint. Standing next to the wall, he could also detect a slight indentation in the middle of it: a poor job of framing, too, or very crooked lumber. He put his face against the wall and sighted along it. The indentation, if there was one, might be about the size of a door.

Ennis ran his hands over the painted Sheetrock. Libby Howell had said this was a partial basement. If so, this wall would be concrete too. People often covered over basement walls, but why finish one and not the other?

He was pondering this when the footstep sounded behind him. He whirled around, heart thudding. A leather work boot was visible on the stairs. Then another, and a leg clad in khaki work pants. Charles Gardner descended carefully to the landing. This time he

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wasn't carrying the oxygen bottle but a Model 1911 Army Colt. The smile Ennis had seen before.

"Well, well. Thought I'd catch somebody in here," he said.

"Sheriff's office," Ennis said. "I'm the guy you talked to earlier."

Gardner shook his head. "Sheriff? Where's your uniform? And that don't look like a sheriff's car out front. So now I'm the one getting nosy. What the hell you doing down here?"

"That's none of your business."

The smile got meaner. "Hell it ain't. People coming and going at all hours. I'm getting a little tired of it."

He brought the pistol up, thumbed back the hammer. Ennis stared, unsure now whether he was dealing with malice or dementia.

"You want to see my ID?"

"Keep your hands where they are. Goddamn little punk, trying to browbeat me in my own goddamn yard." Gardner coughed into his fist and spat. He drew a raspy breath with some difficulty.

"Figured it out, huh? She said somebody would, sooner or later."

"Who?"

"Shut up. You know who. I told her, 'You let her die, cuffed to the bed down here, now you got to live with it.' But of course it's me ends up dealing with it, useless bitch. Pretty good job, I thought, for one day's work. Only way we could be sure." The old man coughed again. He pulled at his nose, examined the results. "Could have used more lime, I guess, or more plastic. Lisette, she'd complain about the smell sometimes after that, but it was gone after a year or so."

Ennis felt sick. At least some of it was fear. He was beginning to believe Charles Gardner wasn't telling him this to ease his conscience. He found his voice.

"You want to come down to the office with me and talk about this? Might be better that way."

Gardner stared, and then laughed. This provoked another round of coughing. Ennis thought to rush him then, but the gun didn't waver. The old man's eyes were rheumy as he caught his breath.

"Think I'm confessing? You dumb bastard. Just feels good talking about it after all these years. Ain't like you're going to tell anybody. And me, well, I figure a bullet in the brain is better than lung cancer." He shrugged. "Or maybe not. I'll see how it goes after they find you."

Now Gardner's grin seemed pure evil. "You were asking about the daughter. I knew her all right. Knew her pretty damn good before the end. Funny thing, that was Lisette's idea. Takes all kinds, huh? Woman was crazy, all that demon shit. I can see why she hung herself."

He pointed the .45 at the deputy's chest. "Hell of it was, I never did get my extension cord back."

Afterward, Ennis never could say what it was that made Charles Gardner glance back up the stairs. Or what he saw there that took the smile from his face as completely as if he'd been stabbed. The

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old man gasped out something and began to cough, three raw barks that stretched into long, wheezing heaves. He doubled over and then sank to his knees, the gun barrel dropping lower with each upheaval.

Ennis took the chance given. He jumped to his right and slapped at the light switch. There was a flash in the darkness as the pistol roared. He scrambled forward blindly, tripped on the landing, and collapsed on top of Gardner. He was still holding the Maglite and began hammering away at the old man's heaving form. The muzzle flashed again and he swung in a panic, sure he'd been hit. It took most of a minute before he realized that Charles Gardner's body had gone limp.

He got up, panting. The flashlight still worked. A pool of blood was blooming under the motionless figure of the old man, who appeared to have shot himself in the abdomen during the struggle. Ennis checked for a pulse. He got out his cell phone and tried to dial 911, missing on the first couple of tries. While it was ringing, he flipped on the overhead light.

There was another bullet hole in the middle of the Sheetrock wall. He walked to it, angled the flashlight so he could peer through. He saw only blackness on the other side.

Ennis leaned against the Blazer and watched as the last wall at 221 Linda went down. It was the first day of spring and a brisk breeze snatched away the dust cloud.

A car pulled up behind his. Laurel Hogue got out and came to stand beside him.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I wanted to see this. Mr. Swan said it was okay."

Ennis couldn't blame her. He suspected she had also visited the cemetery, where the remains of another sixteen-year-old girl were finally resting after thirty years unmourned in a walled-off room. Ennis had stopped by himself a couple of times, had noticed the fresh flowers on the grave.

They watched as the Michigan loader churned forward through the mud, scooping up debris from the flattened house. Some of it took flight: bits of insulation and wallpaper, a flash of yellow that Ennis thought might be a remnant of crime-scene tape.

"I was thinking about the Gray Lady," Laurel said. "I always thought it was the mother. You know, an evil spirit. But now I wonder."

Ennis wondered too. Not that he was going to admit it, or get into a discussion about spirits, evil or otherwise. But he often replayed the night in the basement, sometimes imagining he'd heard a word of recognition in the last gasp of Charles Gardner, just before the coughing fit had felled him.

Had he? He went back and forth on it. But if there was a word, he thought, it might well have been "Sophie." ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

Skull and Cross-Examinations

by Toni L. P. Kelner

18 June 1680

Dearest Mother,

I take pen in hand to inform you of the unexpected events that took place during my voyage to Jamaica to begin the career as a lawyer Father so wished me to have. But before I begin in earnest, I must warn you to have your vial of smelling salts nearby, should you be overcome by horror at my tale, particularly the murder. Do bear in mind that I survived said events, and of course was not myself murdered, or I would not now be writing this letter. Moreover, the ending is a happy one and speaks well of my expectations. Even Father may admit that I performed adequately, so you may need the smelling salts to counter the shock, should he speak well of me. I admit to feeling not a little pride at the resolution of my first case before the bar, or rather, before the mast.

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Are you now fortified? If so, I shall begin. Despite Father's assertions, I did not find sea travel to be invigorating, bracing, or any of the other healthy adjectives he employed before having me escorted up the gangplank of *Fortune's Daughter.* Ironically, any and all of those terms accurately describe my previous life studying at Oxford and dabbling in university theatrics, though I do not think Father agrees.

The voyage was, in fact, deadening to the senses. My nose was the first to go. This was a mercy, if truth be told, given the way it was constantly assailed by the odors of unwashed sailors, the tar and other materials of the ship itself, and the livestock brought aboard to provide fresh food. Next, my hearing was attacked by the constant sounds of waves slapping petulantly at the hull, sails flapping in the wind, and the nearly incomprehensible language of the sailors. Though they reputedly speak the King's English, I would be hard-pressed to prove it in court, even if Father himself were sitting on the bench. Finally the sense of sight was dulled, for there was nothing to see. Yes, the sunsets were quite colorful when the weather was fine, but one looked much like the next. When the weather was not fine, there was nothing at all to see.

Fortunately, the one sense that remained perfectly intact was my sense of self-preservation. I had need of it several weeks into our journey, when we were attacked by pirates.

Yes, Mother, pirates. I trust you have made use of your smelling salts by now, perhaps augmented with a strong cup of tea, thoroughly laden with sugar. Either of those nostrums would have served me well when I realized we were under attack, but my only comfort was remembering Shylock's words in *The Merchant of Venice* when he itemizes the hazards of sea travel, specifically mentioning pirates. Had Father given that warning the attention it deserved, I might not have found myself in such dire straits. How unfortunate that Father continues to hold a grudge for Shakespeare's jovial suggestion to kill all the lawyers.

I will not spend much time describing the attack, for the attack did not take up much time. When the pirate ship was first spotted, it was flying friendly colors, so the captain was unconcerned as it

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drew near. Only as they came into firing range was that flag lowered and a more ominous banner raised.

I should explain that a pirate's flag is far more individualized than I had hitherto suspected. Apparently they view them as a coat of arms of sorts, identifying the captain and the depth of his intentions, and the infamous skull and crossbones is but one design. A red flag means . . . Well, let me say that it is a blessing that our attacker did not fly a red flag. *The Brazen Mermaid*—for that was the name of the attacker—flew a relatively benign black flag emblazoned with a sword thrust into the chest of a skeleton.

By the time the flag was noticed by the sailors aboard the inappropriately named *Fortune's Daughter,* the fight was essentially lost. There was no time to use the small cannon we carried—in fact, our sailors barely had time to arm themselves before grappling hooks were tossed onto our deck and the pirates started to board, already primed to attack.

Battle is far noisier than I'd imagined: gunshots and the clashing of swords, punctuated by yells, groans, and vile cursing. I cannot speak of the appearance of those events, because I saw none of them. I did consider joining in, but having neither a weapon nor skill in using same, I relied on the better part of valor and stayed in my cabin with my fellow passenger, Squire Turow, who was as frantically busy as the combatants on deck.

I have not yet mentioned Squire Turow, a stout, self-satisfied gentleman returning to his home in Jamaica. As the only two passengers on board, we'd become better acquainted than perhaps we would have under other circumstances. When I learned that he had a daughter of marriageable age, I had high hopes of continuing and, depending on the charms of the daughter, perhaps deepening the friendship once we arrived in Port Royal. Though Turow is a tedious man, it has long been accepted as truth among my fellows that a young lady's attractions are in inverse proportion to those of her father, and judging by this, Miss Turow must be a rare beauty, nearly as lovely as my dear sister Kate.

Those plans were far from both our minds that day, as Squire Turow filled a sack with every one of his belongings that might be considered valuable, from a handful of farthings to his snuff box to a rather tasteless necklace intended as á gift for his daughter. Then he concealed the sack in a location he hoped would escape detection by invaders.

I cannot help but add that had I not already known that Squire Turow was not a university man, his choice of hiding places would have confirmed it. No man leaves the gates of Oxford without learning, at the very least, how to conceal one's private effects from his classmates. Turow settled on a marginal site, and by marginal, I mean that it was marginally better than dyeing the sack bright red and placing it in the middle of the room with a

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placard labeling it "TREASURE."

As for me, I'd heard tales of the efficiency with which pirates can convince men to reveal the whereabouts of their wealth, and had no wish to experience any demonstrations of that efficiency. So I placed that which I believed worth stealing into my purse, and tucked it into a pocket, easily accessible should it be demanded. Not that there was a great deal to include, of course. Father's decision to limit my funds was unexpectedly fortuitous. Because of the gold trim, I even included the handsome folding case that sister Kate gave me before my departure, much though I disliked the idea of losing it. I did, however, remove the miniatures of you and Kate from its compartments and place them in an inner vest pocket, feeling that a pirate would be uninterested in them. Sadly, I was unable to pry Father's loose.

All too soon, the sounds of battle ended, and a cheer rang out that was patently not from the crew of *Fortune's Daughter.* Squire Turow's florid face went whiter than the sails. Moments later, the door to the cabin burst open. Two of the most frightening specimens I had ever had the misfortune to encounter rushed in, though at first all I saw were the cutlasses they brandished.

The taller man had a horror of black curls waving from beneath the blood-red kerchief tied round his head. "Lay down your arms!" he bellowed. "The ship is taken and you are prisoners of Captain Parker of the *Brazen Mermaid!*"

Having no weapons to lay down, I obeyed the spirit if not the wording of his command by raising my own arms, and Turow did the same.

The other man, a wiry fellow with a yellow kerchief, said, "Hand over your blunt, or it'll be the worse for you."

Though I'd never heard the word used in that manner before, it took no scholarship to recognize the meaning, and I retrieved my pouch of valuables and offered it to the man.

Only then did I notice that the saffron-kerchiefed pirate was missing his left hand. In its place was a club fashioned of wood with bands of steel reinforcing it. The bloodstained wood left no doubt as to how he made use of it.

Unsure of the appropriate way to make the transfer, I tossed it to the other pirate instead, who caught it and tucked it into his belt.

"Now you," the one-handed pirate said to Squire Turow.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Turow said, less convincingly than the rawest university player.

Certainly his performance did not impress the black-haired pirate, who stepped forward and raised his cutlass. "You think I won't be able to carve it out of you? You'll be begging for me to take it before I'm even winded!"

"Gardner," the smaller pirate said, "the captain said we was to take prisoners, and kill only if we have to."

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"Aye, but he said to find all that was worth finding, too!" the other one snapped. "That's what I aim to do."

Turow assumed a look of obstinate determination, and glared at the pirate, who sheathed his cutlass only long enough to draw a dagger nearly as long.

"For the love of God, Turow," I expostulated. "Give them your gold!"

"Never!"

"Shall I slice off the nose first?" the pirate speculated with an unpleasant gleam in his eye. "Or maybe an ear?"

Turow said nothing, and the pirate paused, whether to draw out his pleasure or to give Turow another chance, I could not say. Then he stepped closer and said, "If that's what you want, you putrid sack of—"

"It's in the dresser," I said. "Wedged behind the bottom drawer."

"You craven!" Turow thundered. "You're no better than they are!"

"Your life is worth more than a bag of gold and trinkets."

"My honor is worth still more," he replied, "but I see that you have none to protect."

While we bickered, the smaller pirate found Turow's bag and tossed it to the other, who looked sorely disappointed as he returned his dagger to its sheath. Then they manhandled us out of the cabin and up onto the deck. The carnage there was horrific, Mother, and in deference to your delicacy, I'll refrain from giving details. I will say that having witnessed the aftereffects of the loss of a hand, the scenes in our university production of *Titus Andronicus* dealing with the amputation of Lavinia's hands were far too circumspect. Then again, perhaps accuracy is not advisable, unless one has the theater's smelling-salts concession.

Turow and I were pushed and prodded toward a huddle of sailors and officers from *Fortune's Daughter* who were being watched over by a trio of armed pirates. Sadly, the captain was not among them. In fact, fully half the crew had gone to their reward.

Once they had rounded up all the survivors, a pirate announced that we were being taken on board the *Brazen Mermaid.* Several gangplanks had been put in place between the two vessels, and we made our precarious way across. Once aboard, we were herded toward the bow of the ship and told to remain there, with a new set of guards on duty.

Meanwhile, back on *Fortune's Daughter,* the pirates were taking everything not nailed down, as well as some items that had previously been quite securely attached. Though there was some gold on board, most of the hold had been filled with foodstuffs and woolens, and it may surprise you, Mother, to find that the pirates were delighted with this commonplace cargo. Even pirates must eat and protect themselves from the elements, not to mention the possibility of trading the ill-gotten goods.

Finally the plunderers had taken everything of value save the

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boards that made up the ship itself. The gangplanks and ropes connecting the vessels were removed, and we set sail.

The men from *Fortune's Daughter* were much moved by the sight of their ravished vessel, and kept their eyes upon it until it faded from view. Even I was affected, though I had not particularly enjoyed my time aboard. Perhaps it was because I thought it likely I would find my stay on the *Brazen Mermaid* even less congenial.

After no little time, during which we had naught to do but share fears about our probable fate, a tall man with the air of command approached us. Evidently he'd had time to change his garments since the battle, for he was wearing a brocade surcoat, satin breeches, and a handsome tricorne hat topped with an egret feather. Unless he'd been born a gentleman, he was of course breaking every sumptuary law ever written, but he did so with élan.

He was accompanied by a more modestly dressed man carrying a bedraggled quill pen, a bottle of ink, and a document of some sort. Those of the pirate crew not actively involved with sailing the ship circled us, as if to watch a performance.

The first man said, "Gentlemen, I apologize that my duties have kept me from welcoming you aboard. I do so now." He actually cut a leg, and quite handsomely, too. "I am Captain Nathaniel Parker, of the *Brazen Mermaid,* and this is Mr. Talman, our quartermaster."

I looked at the man with the pen and paper with interest, having learned that the quartermaster was often more important a personage than the captain, because it was his job to keep track of both provisions and booty. Mr. Talman had the sour face of a provoked Oxford don planted on the body of a brute well able to maintain his place on a pirate ship.

"Now, if you will do me the honor of introducing yourselves . . ." Parker said.

We prisoners looked at one another. Then the ranking officer stepped up. "First Lieutenant Hart, formerly of the *Fortune's Daughter.*"

"A responsible position. Your wife must be very proud."

"I am not yet married."

"A pity. Well, Lieutenant, it happens that our ship is in need of a man of your abilities. Are you willing to sign our articles and, in return for a full share, join our crew?"

He drew himself up. "I am not."

"Would you prefer to jump into the sea?"

Hart could only stare.

"You see," Parker said, "those are the only choices. Join the crew, or visit Davy Jones."

There was a long moment, punctuated only by a gesture from Parker which caused his men to step aside, leaving a clear path to the railing.

After swallowing hard, Hart said, "May I read your articles first?"

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"Fair enough."

But while Hart made a show of looking over the document, it was clear his decision was already made, and when the quartermaster handed him the pen, he signed and was borne away by the crew with a show of welcome.

The introductions continued, and in each case, Parker made a pretense of small talk before offering the choice he'd made to Lieutenant Hart. Some signed reluctantly, and some willingly, but all but two men signed. One stiffly marched to the railing and threw himself off, with a proud farewell of "God save the King!" Another grabbed for a pistol at one of the pirates' belt, but he was shot on the spot, and then tossed over the railing as well.

I trust I need not tell you of my trepidation as my own turn approached. Though I was not particularly looking forward to becoming a lawyer, neither did I wish to become a pirate. Even without any useful sailing skills, as a young man in good health, I felt sure I would soon be forced to wear a kerchief of some revolting shade. Then I took note of something. The captain spoke to a sailor, and then said he had no need for a man with his skills. After adding two more men to his crew, he passed by another sailor from *Fortune's Daughter*, though in that case it was evident the man would probably not last out the night. Finally, upon reaching the last of the surviving crewmen, he again neglected to issue an invitation.

A thought occurred to me, barely more than a guess, but I resolved to put it to use.

All that remained were Squire Turow and myself, and of course, Turow pushed himself forward.

"And you are?" Parker said, courteously enough.

"I am Squire Turow of Port Royal, and I demand that you release me immediately."

"If I were to do that here, I fear you would drown."

There were appreciative chuckles from the pirates, and sputtering from Turow.

Presumably it was obvious Turow was no use aboard a ship, for Parker turned to me. "And you, sir?"

"William Cunningham," I said. "Formerly of London, and if fate permits, soon to set up practice in Port Royal."

"What would that practice be?"

"I am a lawyer, sir."

If you read this portion to Father, be sure to prepare for the inevitable snort, along with the comment that I have done nothing to earn such a title other than attend classes, and not nearly enough of those. As events played out, I argued my first case before another day had passed. But for now, let me continue my narrative.

"A lawyer," Parker said speculatively.

"Not a skill you need, I suspect."

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"Perhaps, perhaps not. Is your wife in Port Royal?"

"No, she is with her parents in London, waiting for me to send for her."

Smelling salts, Mother! I promise you, I have not married without your knowledge or blessing. I lied to the man, intentionally and with forethought. Having noted that the healthy men Parker had passed over had mentioned their wives and children, something the other sailors had not, I was betting my future that it was no coincidence.

Squire Turow stiffened, since I'd made it plain that I hoped to pay my respects to his daughter, but perhaps because he already thought me a cad, for once he kept his mouth shut.

"You are young to be married," Parker said, suspiciously I feared.

"Childhood sweethearts." I could not tell if he believed me, so I added, "I carry her picture with me always, if you'd care to see." I pulled out the miniature of Kate to show him, and after he inspected it, he said only, "A lovely lass." He sounded almost disappointed, though at the time, I could not imagine why.

He stepped back, and addressed the remaining prisoners. "Gentlemen, I'm sure you realize your situation. You are entirely at my mercy." He stopped to let his words sink in. "But I do not kill unnecessarily. Do as you're told, give us no trouble, and at the first opportunity, you'll be left where you can make your way to some town or another. But if you give us grief . . ." Again he timed his pause for full dramatic impact. "You'll get it back fivefold. Is that understood?"

There were murmurs of assent, but I decided it would do no harm to make my understanding more definite, and in ringing tones, I said, "Perfectly, Captain."

Parker seemed satisfied, and though I heard Turow muttering "lickspittle," I ignored him magnanimously. Whether because of my somewhat tenuous claim to a profession or because of my wholly fraudulent claim to a bride, I was alive and not a pirate.

Despite my joy, the rest of that day was the most miserable I have ever spent. First we were stripped down to our skins, while still on deck, to ensure that we'd concealed nothing worth taking. The pirates were not kind in their judgment of our appearance—I even saw one of the former crew members from *Fortune's Daughter* jeering. Once we'd dressed again, we were taken to that part of the ship known as the bilges, and locked into a barred cell. The less said about the conditions, the better, but I will say that there was scarcely enough space for the five men imprisoned there, let alone the vermin in residence.

This, we were told, was where we'd stay until the captain released us.

At first, we were cheerful enough, merely from having survived, and eagerly discussed our circumstances. According to one of the sailors, Parker had been known to release prisoners unharmed in the past. The other sailor pointed out that had Parker killed pas-

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sengers, they'd never have been heard from again. The first man countered that he could have killed us already, had he been so inclined, but the second opined that he could be saving us for later entertainment. The former shipmates would have come to blows had I not physically restrained them.

Afterward, the two of them were content to glower at one another, ignoring my attempts at conversation. Turow still refused to acknowledge my existence, and the third sailor was barely conscious, and only moaned until, some hours later, he died. Nobody came in answer to our calls, so we were left with his body for some time.

I cannot speak for the others, but my feelings were made only worse by the sounds of celebration that rang throughout the ship. The pirate crew was not modest in their victory—there was music, dancing, and undoubtedly feasting and drinking. I suppose it was no wonder that we were neglected for the remainder of that day and night.

Our situation was a little better come morning. First off, a crewman came by with food and drink for us, and it was reasonably generous in portion and quality. Then the poor devil who had died was removed, presumably to be thrown overboard. I'll admit I was so relieved by his absence that I gave little thought to whether or not he would receive a proper sendoff.

There seemed to be more commotion on the *Brazen Mermaid* than I was used to aboard *Fortune's Daughter,* but I attributed it to the greater size of the pirate crew and perhaps a lack of formality. It was not until midmorning that I found out the true cause of the uproar. That was when a crew member came and pounded on the bars. "On your feet for the captain!"

We stood, and a moment later, Captain Parker arrived. "You there," he said to me. "You say you're an experienced lawyer?"

"I am." I realize I've given Father yet another cause for derision, but I was at least a fledgling lawyer, and I have had many experiences. The fact that these two elements of my life were entirely separate was hardly worth mentioning.

"We have need of your services. One of my crew members has been accused of breaking one of the ship's articles, and I hoped you'd be willing to assist."

"In court?" I asked, thinking it most unlikely.

"Not an actual court, no, just here on board. Normally we'd take care of the matter without so much bother, but it seems a shame not to take advantage of your presence and give the crew a bit of a show at the same time."

"I see. What, exactly, would you wish me to do?"

"I was hoping you'd argue his case for him."

"Is he unable to do so himself? That is the usual procedure."

"The accused is a simple man, not much for words. It'd be a mercy if you could speak for him. He's an old shipmate of mine,

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and I want it handled fair and square, if you're willing."

I hesitated. "Would my other option be the same as you gave the sailors yesterday?"

He smiled, but with more menace than mirth. "Nothing like that. I've given my word that you'll be set free. Of course, the sooner this matter is taken care of, the sooner I'll be able to get you and your comrades to dry land. Unless you're that fond of the accommodations, that is."

Though I would like to pretend my actions were on behalf of my fellow prisoners, it was, in fact, the thought of getting myself off that ship that impelled me to say, "In that I am always willing to speed justice, I accept."

Captain Parker released me, and even ordered a bucket of water for me to perform a sketchy toilet. Turow, of course, had much to say about my decision, especially after I accidentally splashed him.

I was taken to a cabin and told that my "client" would be along directly. You can only imagine my alarm when he arrived and I saw it was the black-haired giant who'd threatened Turow with such enthusiasm the day before. Even though his hands were manacled, I was most uneasy when the door was closed behind him, leaving us alone.

"Cunningham, that's your name, isn't it?" he asked.

"It is. And you are . . . ?"

"Perry Gardner. I wants to thank you for agreeing to help me. I could tell you were a decent man yesterday. Showing us where your friend's loot were hid was smartly done."

"It seemed the prudent course," I said, surprised by his mild tone.

"Aye, it were that, and saved me no end of trouble. I've no love for torture."

"But . . . You said . . ."

He actually broke into a grin. "Fooled you, did I? Funny what a loud voice and a few oaths will do to make a man give up his valuables. And the way Crane acted all nice and concerned? That makes it work even better. The bad looking worse next to the good, as it were."

"You were most convincing."

"Crane was the one to come up with the ploy," the pirate confided. "He used to be an actor before he went on the account."

"On the account?"

"Before he became a pirate."

"I see. I understand you have a case for me to argue."

"That I do. They're saying I done murder."

I nodded, wishing I'd thought to ask Parker exactly which article had been broken before I agreed to help. Then I remembered the pirate captain's smile—it would not have changed my decision.

And so, having accepted the case, it behooved me to treat him as a legitimate client, and one thing I have learned from Father is

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that a lawyer should never ask a client whether or not he is actually guilty. Seating myself on one of the stools in the room, I gestured him toward the other. "Pray tell me the circumstances that led up to this accusation."

"I can't tell you much," he said, once settled. "I fell asleep topside last night, and when Murbles came across me this morn—"

"Murbles?"

"The first mate. When he saw me, he tossed a bucket of water on me to rouse me. I leapt up, cursing a mite from the surprise, but the man on the deck beside of me didn't stir. We turned him over, and saw it was a man by the name of Biggs, dead as a doornail. Since I was next to him, Murbles figured I did the killing."

"Couldn't he have died in his sleep?"

"Not bloody likely. His tongue was stuck out, and you could see the marks of fingers on both sides of his throat. Somebody throttled the bastard."

I couldn't resist a glance at Gardner's hands, which appeared quite strong. "Other than proximity, was there any reason to place the blame on you?"

"Aye, there was. Murbles searched the body, and when he saw he didn't have nothing on him, he had me turn my pockets out. I had Biggs's pipe and tobacco, and a gold-and-pearl ring he'd been wearing, plus some blunt I hadn't had before. But I swear I don't know how any of it got there."

It was a blow to the case, but not a fatal one. "The killer must have placed those things in your pockets to implicate you."

"That's what I told Murbles, but he didn't believe me. So they slapped me in irons and said they were going to maroon me. But the captain and I've been knowing each other since we came to sea, and he said the least they could do was give me a trial. Only nobody wanted to speak for me, and I was going to have to do it myself, until I remembered you were in the hold. Some of the crew were against using you, but Captain said it'd be a shame to miss a chance at seeing a real lawyer in action."

My first thought was that these men were fated to disappointment if they thought I was a real lawyer. My second was that the captain would not be pleased if I failed to adequately defend an old friend. My third, that Father would also not be pleased if I failed, though less likely to toss me overboard. And finally, I dreaded the blow to my sense of worth if I could not help this man.

With all those thoughts, it took a few moments before I could actually devote a few to the task at hand, but Gardner just sat patiently.

"Well," I said, as if I'd come to some momentous conclusion, "it seems that you had both the means and the opportunity, but did you have any reason to wish Biggs dead?"

He shook his head. "I don't know that I'd spoken two words to him before last night. He only joined the crew a fortnight past."

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"Was he forced to join the crew?"

"No, he was an old member of the Brethren." When he saw my look of confusion, he explained, "The Brethren of the Coast, that's what we call ourselves. This weren't his first voyage, not by a long shot."

"But you had never sailed with him before?"

"That's right."

"What about last night? What transpired?"

"Well, after the captain got done dealing with the prisoners . . ." He had the good grace to look embarrassed at this, as if remembering how we prisoners had been dealt with. "Afterward, he gave permission for us to make merry, not that we needed him to tell us that."

"I believe I heard evidence of your merriment."

"It were a grand time, that's for truth. Plenty of grog, plenty of food. No women, but with the booty we've earned, there'll be time for that when the voyage is done."

"And in the course of your conviviality, you met up with Biggs?"

"That's right. I was playing dice with Crane and a couple of others—just for fun, mind, not for money, that being against the articles."

"Of course."

"While we was dicing, Biggs came to talk to Crane. The two of 'em had sailed together aboard the *Fair Wind,* off the coast of Venezuela. Biggs started talking about some of the prizes they'd taken, and I told him about some of mine."

"Comparing notes, as it were."

"That's right. I might have made it sound better than it were, mind you, but no more than Biggs and his talk of sacks of doubloons and pearls from Margarita."

"Completely natural to exaggerate," I assured him.

"That led to talk of battles, and I told him about how we took a merchantman off Hispaniola just a month ago. Now *that* was a fight!" He smiled at the memory. "The tussle yesterday was nothing compared to that. No offense."

"None taken."

"Biggs knew he'd been outclassed—he got quiet as the grave after I told him how many men had died, and the injuries we took. That was the battle where Crane lost his hand, and that's a story worth telling."

"And after you finished relating war stories?"

"Then the singing started, and dancing, too."

"Perhaps more grog?"

"Plenty more. I don't remember much after that, truth be told, not until I woke up with a dead man next to me." He shuddered, and having recently shared sleeping quarters with a corpse myself, I could sympathize.

"Did you argue with Biggs?"

He shook his head. "He called me a filthy, lying son of a whore,

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but that's not the sort of thing you'd kill a man for."

"Any witnesses? Did anybody say they'd seen you kill him?"

"Nobody that I know of. Admittedly, we were all the worse for drink."

"Then it seems to me that our case is secure," I said confidently. In fact, I was quite confident. There was no evidence against Gardner, other than the coincidence of being found next to the body, and there was no more reason to believe him guilty of killing Biggs than there was of me having killed the poor sailor in my cell. Less so, actually, since there were only three others with opportunity to kill the one, whereas any member of the pirate crew could have done in Biggs.

Just then, a pair of sailors came to escort Gardner and me onto the deck, where the trial was to take place. I had no doubt that my rhetorical skills would soon make mincemeat of whatever arguments could be used against Gardner. After all, this was a pirate ship, not a proper court. How much of a challenge could the case present?

I continued to believe that right up until I saw the courtroom that had been erected on deck. The dock, the bench, the jury box filled with a twelve-man jury—all were in their proper places. Of course, they were only rough approximations, made from boards, crates, and barrels, but the fact that they existed at all was enough. I realized that these pirates quite likely knew more about courtroom procedures than I.

I turned to Gardner in amazement.

"Looks good, don't it?" he said. "You knew the Brethren like to act out trials, didn't you? And Captain Parker is a stickler for getting it right. He was in court himself once or twice, and remembers how it was done. We don't always go to so much trouble for crew business, but being as we've got a real lawyer here . . ." He seemed uncommonly proud of the whole production, considering that it had all been put into place for his prosecution.

A burly pirate with a red beard approached us. "That there's your table," he said to me. "Gardner, you go to the dock."

I fervently wished it had been the other kind of dock before me, the kind that led to land and a well-appointed public house. As I took my place, I asked the bearded man, "Will you be acting as bailiff?"

"That's right."

"And the captain will be the judge?"

"No, he's sitting this one out, being that he and Gardner are old sailing mates."

I turned and saw Parker in the midst of the spectators, watching me with no little interest.

The bailiff went to the spot where I've seen so many bailiffs stand in Father's court, and said, "Be upstanding." Out came the judge, who turned out to be Crane, the one-handed pirate, dressed in a moth-eaten black robe and the most disreputable wig I'd ever

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seen, but strutting like any silk-clad magistrate. As he went behind the table that was to serve as his bench, I saw that the one missing prop was a gavel. A moment later, when he pounded on the table with his club, I realized that it was not needed.

"Be sitting," the bailiff intoned, and those of us with seats obeyed. I took the opportunity to see who would be serving as prosecutor, and was not pleased to see that dour quartermaster Mr. Talman was playing the role. A quartermaster is often the most educated member of a crew, which was the last thing I desired in an opponent.

Still feeling somewhat stunned by the preparations, I followed one of the first lessons I learned at university. I stalled. Standing once again, I said, "May it please the court, I would like to make a request before we begin the proceedings."

Judge Crane looked at the captain, and when he nodded, said, "You may make your request."

"Since your court is not ruled by the body of laws I have spent my career studying, might I have a few moments to examine the ship's articles on which your justice system is based?"

Again Crane looked over at the captain, and again he nodded. I heard an expression of impatience from the quartermaster, but he stomped away from his table and returned a moment later with the paper I'd seen men signing the night before.

"Thank you," I said, and took it up to read. It was a remarkable document, one I think even Father would admire. In its twelve tenets, it laid out the rules by which the crew lived and, depending on the severity of their infractions, died. Though I'd originally intended only to give myself time to think, I was fascinated. All food was to be divided equally, and booty divided into shares which were allocated according to rank. Those who lost a limb or joint were to be compensated from the company share—five hundred pieces of eight for a hand or foot and eight hundred for a leg or arm. Gaming for money was forbidden, as my client had pointed out, as was bringing women or boys on board for dalliance, fighting on board the ship, and stealing from a crew member. The harshest punishments were reserved for those who were careless with fire near the powder magazine, defrauded the company, or showed cowardice during battle. I finished reading, then waited as long as I dared for inspiration to strike. When it did not, and the crowd grew restless, I returned the paper to the quartermaster.

"A very clearly written contract," I said, "and in a handsome hand, as well."

Mr. Talman, evidently unimpressed by my courtesy, merely snorted.

Now the bailiff recited an approximation of the opening of court, and Judge Crane said, "The prosecution can now make its opening statement."

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Talman stood and in a bored voice said, "Seaman Gardner strangled Seaman Biggs and stole his belongings, and should be marooned."

There was a murmur of discontent from the gallery, and Judge Crane said, "That's not the proper way to do it, Mr. Talman. You're supposed to say that you're going to prove all that."

Talman frowned, but said, "Very well. I intend to prove that Gardner strangled Biggs. Does that suit the court?"

"You're supposed to call him, 'my Lord,'" the bailiff put in, but shriveled under Talman's glare.

"The defense may now make its statement," Judge Crane said.

"Thank you, my Lord," I said respectfully. "The defense intends to prove that Seaman Percy Gardner is completely innocent of the heinous crime of which he has been accused."

The crowd's reaction was much more approving, and I started to experience a bit of the same warm glow hitherto felt only while on stage.

Mr. Talman, still clearly uninterested in playing the game, called Murbles the first mate to the witness stand, and I was amazed to see that the bailiff actually produced a Bible for the swearing-in. The cover showed signs of wear, but the pages within looked pristine, as if the book were rarely, if ever, opened.

Murbles told his story straightforwardly enough, with minimal interruptions from the judge. I maintained a look of concerned interest until my time came to question him.

"You say you found the deceased lying next to Mr. Gardner?"

"That's right."

"But no witness saw the crime being committed?"

"Nobody that was sober enough to remember, anywise." There was laughter, quickly quelled by the judge.

I went on. "So other than the fact that the two were near one another, you have no reason to believe Mr. Gardner killed Mr. Biggs? Don't you find it unlikely that Gardner would strangle him, only to lay down next to the body? Wouldn't he instead have taken the first opportunity to absent himself?" I smiled winningly, giving the man a chance to admit his error in logic.

"I was thinking Gardner killed Biggs while he was drunk and then passed out."

"So your contention is that my client killed the man, robbed him, placed his ill-gotten gains into his pocket, and then fell asleep?"

"Only stands to reason," the man said. "If somebody else killed Biggs so as to steal his blunt, he wouldn't of put it in Gardner's pocket. What would be the point of killing him if he didn't make a profit out of it?"

"Men kill for many reasons, do they not? And having killed, do they not then try to cover up their crimes?"

"I wouldn't know about that," the mate said stolidly. "All I know

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is that Gardner was seen with Biggs, Gardner was next to Biggs's body, and Gardner had Biggs's blunt in his pocket. Seems plain enough to me."

I looked over at the jury, and sadly, it seemed plain enough to them, too. "I have no further questions for this witness."

Talman stood only long enough to say, "The prosecution rests its case, which I hope means that we can finish up this farce."

"Not until the defense gets a turn," Judge Crane said. He then asked me, "Do you wish to call any witnesses?"

I considered calling Gardner to the stand, but I didn't think there was anything he could say that would help his case. In fact, if he quoted Biggs calling him a filthy, lying son of a whore, it could well hinder his defense. But who else could I call? Any of the other pirates on board could have been the killer. As I looked at the men around me, inspiration finally struck. "My Lord, if it pleases you, I would like to call a witness. More than one, in fact."

"Name 'em."

I made a sweeping gesture. "I wish to call the crew of the *Brazen Mermaid.*"

The gallery erupted, and I heard Mr. Talman cursing me and, indirectly, Father. After much pounding with his club, the judge made himself heard. "You want to call every man jack on the ship?" he asked.

"Yes, my Lord. It is my belief that another crew member is the real murderer. Therefore, if we can determine which man was out of the sight of his fellows for long enough, we shall know who killed Biggs. The only way to discover this is to verify the whereabouts of every man on board."

Crane looked over at the captain yet again, who in turn looked at the crew to see where their opinions lay. After informally polling those who were closest, he nodded at the judge, who said, "The court will allow it."

I requested a list of the crew members, and once it was ungraciously supplied by Mr. Talman, we began. I rather think the sailors enjoyed the process of coming to the witness stand, one by one. Most of them had been relegated to spectator up until then, so they relished the opportunity to swear on the Bible and become participants as well.

Considering the size of the crew, and the magnitude of the previous night's festivities, I would have wagered a handsome sum that I would be able to identify any number of men whose location during the hours in question would be in doubt, but as Father often points out, my luck in gambling is frequently bad. Somehow no man had escaped the attention of his fellows.

The captain had been drinking in his cabin, along with the first mate and the quartermaster. A small number of men, mostly those drafted from *Fortune's Daughter,* had been on duty to allow the

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others their pleasures. Other men had been gaming, eating, drinking, and dancing, but always in groups of five or more. And of course, we prisoners had been locked safely away.

At one point, I thought I had finally located another suspect, when a dour-faced specimen with an eye patch would say only that he'd been below-decks, and would not name a companion. But then one of the younger men announced, "He was with me." I asked that man what they had been doing, purely to verify his veracity, but the sniggers and catcalls from the rest of the crew drowned out any answer he might have cared to make. After a moment, I realized the truth, and let the matter drop.

I do not mean to be obscure, Mother, but . . . Actually, I do mean to be obscure. Let me say only that the men were thoroughly occupied during the time in question.

The patience of the crew was growing thin by the time I finished, and I was growing desperate. For though I questioned every man—including the members of the jury, the captain, the quartermaster, and the bailiff—I could find only three men who could not be alibied: my client, the deceased, and the one man on board who could not be guilty—Judge Crane with his missing hand. Two men who could have committed murder, but the marks on the dead man's throat spoke louder than words, telling me that my client was doomed.

Gardner was no doubt mentally preparing to meet his fate.

At this point, Mother, you may think I had doubts as to my client's innocence, but this was not the case. In truth, I'd never believed him innocent. Whether or not he'd killed Biggs, I had never lost sight of the fact that the man was a pirate. Killing was his livelihood. No, his despair did not concern me nearly as much as my own.

After years of education and my father's most ardent desires, I was no lawyer. Like the pirates around me, I was only playing a part, but unlike my bravura performances in *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus,* I had failed miserably, and was now likely to spend months in that cell below-decks. For a brief moment, I considered confessing my bachelor state and signing the articles I'd so carefully perused.

Fortunately the moment passed, mainly because the thought of my theatrical triumphs woke something in my memory. Suddenly the truth revealed itself to me, as well as a way to share that revelation with the court.

Though my mental activity was great, to the outside observer it must have looked as if I was merely staring into space, because Judge Crane said, "Are you done?"

"Not quite, sir," I said. "There is one man left to question. You, our honorable judge."

Crane indignantly said, "You can't question the judge!"

"On the contrary. There are numerous precedents for taking such an action, notably in the case of Mortimer the Sussex Bandit." Do not be surprised if you are not familiar with this case, Mother.

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I made it up. It has always been my belief that there are times when a lie is needed to serve the cause of a greater truth. And, might I remind you, I myself had not sworn to be truthful.

At any rate, my performance convinced the captain, who nodded as if the case I'd cited was one whose details he had only momentarily failed to recall, and said, "He's got the right of it, Crane." To me, he added, "Get on with it."

"Just as soon as our bailiff swears him in."

The obedient man approached the bench, then hesitated. "How's he going to put his left hand on the Bible? He's got none."

"In such cases, the law recognizes the former location of the appendage," I said.

The bailiff looked confused until Captain Parker barked, "He can put his stump on the Bible."

Crane dutifully raised his right hand, and gingerly put his wood-clad limb onto the Bible.

"No, no, that won't do," I said. "Even the finest of ladies remove their gloves on such occasions." That reminds me, Mother. When the opportunity presents itself, ask my father what actually happens on such occasions, and inform me of his response.

Crane looked stubborn. "What difference does it make?"

I replied, "For the oath to be binding, there must be actual contact between your flesh and the Good Book."

Still Crane made no move to remove the appliance. "It ain't fit to see."

"My dear sir, surely these combat-hardened men won't flinch at the sight."

He looked around as if to gauge the reaction, and must have realized that most of the crew were in agreement with me, and many were morbidly curious about his deformity. So he reluctantly loosed the straps that attached the club to the end of his arm, and pulled it off to reveal the stump of his hand.

It was a repulsive sight, a puckered scar streaked with angry red. He held it up defiantly for a moment, then gingerly laid it upon the leather binding of the Bible.

The bailiff, who had in fact flinched, recovered himself to administer the oath, and while he did so, I moved closer to the judge's bench.

Once Crane had repeated the words "So help me, God," he looked at me and snapped, "Does that satisfy you?"

"Not quite." When I say my next motion was as quick as a whip, I assure you, I tell you only the truth. Before the man suspected what I was about, I grabbed that appalling stump and held it tightly.

Then I pulled it off, and revealed the perfectly whole hand that had been concealed.

After but a second of shock, Crane vaulted over the makeshift judge's bench and threw himself onto me bodily, knocking me to the deck. His hands were on my throat—both of them—and had

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not other members of the crew recovered their senses quickly enough, he'd have squeezed the breath from me, just as he had from Biggs. It provided an excellent demonstration of his guilt, but frankly, one I would rather have done without.

Moments later, while several sailors enthusiastically restrained Crane, Captain Parker examined the club and the stump, then turned to me in consternation. "How the devil did you know?"

Realizing that this was not an audience to appreciate modesty or understatement, I abandoned all thoughts of using either. "No one clue revealed the truth—it was all the facts taken together. One, I knew my client to be innocent of this crime. Two, only two men had the opportunity, and if it was not my client, it had to be Crane. Three, Crane was formerly an actor, an occupation that relies on deception even more than piracy. The chopping off of a hand or arm is common enough on stage, and given sufficient preparation, I myself could produce an illusion convincing enough to sicken even your crew, as well as a much better prop than that." I flicked a hand at the "stump" the captain was holding, now revealed as nothing but wax and leather. "That would never have fooled anyone for long, had not the club concealed it."

"But why kill Biggs and leave the money on somebody else?" Mr. Talman asked.

"You know that Biggs and Crane sailed together before?"

"Aye. Are you thinking they had an old quarrel?"

"Possibly, but I suspect that this is not the first occasion Crane claimed payment for that hand. He could have repeated the trick any number of times. He joins a crew, pretends to lose a hand, receives payment for same, and as soon as possible leaves that crew, only to appear on another ship, his lost hand mysteriously healed. Biggs must have already seen Crane fake the injury, and was therefore in a position to reveal the scheme. Crane killed him to protect himself, and used my client as a scapegoat."

The captain turned to Crane. "Is that the way of it?"

Crane's only reply was to spit invective, and since some of his curses sounded suspiciously like the Bard's, I felt sure he had indeed been an actor.

Parker ordered him taken below, hopefully to a different cell from the one occupied by the prisoners from *Fortune's Daughter,* and set men to dismantling the courtroom. Almost as an afterthought, my client was released from his manacles and gave me a hearty slap on my shoulder that very nearly knocked me down.

"I suppose that wasn't a total waste of time after all," even Talman had to admit.

"Saved a good man," Parker said, giving Gardner a slap as firm as the one I'd received, "and got rid of a bad one. Cunningham, we are in your debt."

Perhaps it was foolish, but I could not let the opportunity pass.

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"As to that, there is my fee to discuss."

The captain eyed me. "Your fee?"

I nodded, endeavoring to assume the air of a man who'd said the most reasonable thing in the world. "It is customary. After all, Crane's share now returns to the ship's coffers, as does the money he was awarded for the loss of his hand."

"Are you claiming a full share?" Talman said in an alarming tone. In fact, it reminded me of Father when last I saw him, though perhaps you best not mention that to him.

"Absolutely not," I said firmly, and the tension eased measurably. "I ask for two things only. One, when my shipmate Squire Turow was relieved of his possessions, the proceeds included a necklace. I would like to reclaim it."

"The one he tried to hide?" Gardner said. "It went into the ship's coffers with the rest of the takings."

"Let's have a look at it," the captain said. A chest containing a tempting array of baubles was produced, and Gardner quickly located the correct one.

He handed it to the captain, who looked it over with a practiced eye. "This thing?" he said doubtfully. "It's naught but a cheap trinket."

"It has sentimental value."

He shrugged at my folly and tossed it to me. "Done."

"Thank you. One other thing. I would very much like to keep this." I held aloft the club Crane had used to conceal his hand.

"What the devil for?" he wanted to know.

"Just as a souvenir from my most unusual case." As my first, it was certainly the most unusual one.

Parker shrugged again. "We've no use for it. Nobody will be trying that trick again, not on this ship."

I thanked him again, and having no desire to return to the cell below, happily accepted when he asked me to join him for dinner. The cuisine was not refined, but it was plentiful, and the abundant wine surprisingly good. Though I don't remember details after a certain point, I am reasonably sure that the evening was spent pleasantly. I also have a dim memory of reciting the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V,* but perhaps that was merely a dream.

The next day, the ship stopped at an island that was only barely deserving of the name, being nothing more than a spur of sand dotted with a few scraggly trees, where Crane's punishment was carried out.

Something that might surprise you, Mother, was that Crane was not sentenced to this fate merely for killing Biggs, which is not directly addressed in the articles. Fighting aboard ship is forbidden, but oddly enough, murder is not mentioned. No, to the pirates, Crane's more serious crime was his defrauding the company by collecting five hundred pieces of eight for the loss of a hand. In fact,

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more than one man suggested that the hand be severed in retribution, but the captain maintained that marooning him was enough.

I admit I had never before considered the horror of being marooned. Crane was left equipped only with a jug of water, a piece of hardtack, and a pistol with only one ball and enough powder for a single shot. He was allowed to keep his clothes, which I was told proves the basic humanity of Captain Parker, who could have ordered him stripped of every stitch. But dressed or wearing nothing but what God gave him, the man was doomed to a miserable death from starvation, thirst, and exposure to the sun.

Crane did not accept his fate with dignity. He struggled with the men tasked with ferrying him to the island, and cursed them with great imagination as they rowed back to the ship. I must admit to mixed emotions at seeing him abandoned, murderer though he was, and I watched him as we sailed away. As the island itself faded into the distance, I fancied I heard a gunshot, and I pray I was not mistaken.

That unpleasant task accomplished, Captain made good on his promise to release the other prisoners and myself. We sailed to Jamaica, and though we were not taken to any of the island's settlements, we were rowed ashore and left at a sunny beach only a few hours' march to Kingston. Gardner was among the pirates escorting us, and thanked me most sincerely for my efforts on his behalf.

"Especially," he said, "after what I threatened to do to your friend."

"But you would never have gone through with it."

"Of course I would have, if you hadn't told me where his gold was."

"But you said—"

"I said I take no pleasure in it. I take no particular pleasure from taking a piss, either, but I does it when I needs to."

Perhaps it was just as well I hadn't known that before the trial.

At any rate, I suspect it was due to his good wishes and those of Captain Parker that we were given a generous ration of water and hardtack to provision us. He also handed me a small sack of gold, an amount that more than made up for the funds I'd lost during the attack. I considered myself most fortunate.

As I write this, I am in my newly acquired offices, with a freshly painted sign proclaiming me to be "William Cunningham, Lawyer." Already I have met with several clients. Though it pains me greatly to admit it, perhaps Father was right in insisting that I take up law. If I can fool a crew of suspicious pirates into believing me to be an expert in legal matters, surely I can do the same with the trusting citizens of Port Royal.

I have also begun to make myself known to the members of society here, and upon two occasions, have spent time in the company of a most respectable lady: the lovely Miss Turow. This may surprise you, Mother, considering how Turow's opinion of me had plummeted, but I managed to win him over.

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You see, once the pirates left us, and we began our overland trek toward civilization, I produced the necklace I'd claimed as part of my fee and presented it to Turow, along with the following words.

"Please, sir, give this to your daughter with my most heartfelt compliments. If she should bear me ill will for having revealed the location of these jewels to the pirates who attacked us, please convey my word as a gentleman that I did so only to preserve the safety and honor of her father, both of which are far more valuable to a dutiful daughter than even this treasure."

I was quite proud of this speech; it moved me nearly as deeply as it did Squire Turow, who could barely speak his thanks.

Then I added, "Retrieving this was the least I could do for you, after you aided me in my imposture."

"Imposture?" he said.

"Of being married. Of course, you knew differently, but held your tongue most admirably."

"I could do no less to protect a man of your quality," he said as if he had never doubted me.

From that moment on, he referred to me as "my boy," and spoke of his warmest wishes that I should soon be as dear to his daughter as I was to him. She has shown herself to be most appreciative of my efforts in retrieving her father and her jewelry.

Speaking of jewelry, you may be wondering about the gifts I enclose for you and my sister. I obtained them honestly, though the same cannot be said of their previous owner. You may recall that I asked Captain Parker for Crane's club, telling him that I wished it for a souvenir. That was true, but not complete.

It occurred to me when examining the thing after Crane's duplicity was revealed, that it was larger than it needed to be to conceal a hand. I also reasoned that if I were surrounded daily by dishonest men, I might well want to keep my valuables in a container that would never be separated from me. Close to hand, one might say.

Pirates, like university men, understand the value of a secure hiding place.

So please accept these pearls, liberated from the Spanish off the coast of Margarita, and fashioned into earrings to enhance your beauty. May they continually remind you—and Father—of the successful conclusion to my adventure.

I remain your most loving and devoted son. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author admits that this story owes as much to old pirate movies as it does to factual research about the Golden Age of Piracy, but three of the most unlikely aspects of the story are true. One, pirates did attempt to live by the articles they signed. Two, some pirate captains would not force married men to join their crews. And three, pirates did in fact reenact trials on board ship as a diversion, vying for the roles of judge, bailiff, jailer, and hangman.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE CORONATION COIN

by C. J. Harper

The first time I saw Julia Gallagher, she was lying naked on the bed in the Honeymoon Cabin at Pezhekee Resort near Glenwood. In the close heat of midnight, she was sprawled across the rumpled sheets like a pinup girl. Her skin was a whispery bronze, her hair the color of cinnamon toast. She gazed up at me through eyes that were sharp circles of blue blown glass.

Needless to say, she was dead.

She'd called me that morning and told me to meet her that night.

This is the first fiction publication for pseudonymous Minnesota lawyer turned writer C. J. Harper, but last year he received the honor of having an unpublished novel shortlisted for the Debut Dagger Award of the British Crime Writers Association. That book, entitled *The Shadow of the Dead*, is in the hard-boiled genre, and as far as we know, it's still unsold. Book publishers take note!

"There's just one small catch," I'd said into the handset of my battered black telephone. I was leaning out the open window of my sweltering office on the sixth floor of the Cahuenga Building. A portable oscillating fan perched on a filing drawer wheezed hot air at my back.

"What kind of a catch?" she said, alarm sneaking into her cornflake voice.

"You're in Minnesota and I'm not."

Before her call, I'd been watching a pigeon play chicken with the traffic over a sandwich lying in the intersection where Cahuenga and Hollywood Boulevards collide. The gray bird had taken a couple of dry runs at the free food, but had been turned back both times by the rhythmic chaos of the morning traffic.

"In case you've been asleep for the last twenty years, Mr. Nash, they've invented a thing called an airplane that can help you get here by tonight."

"In case you've been asleep for the last ten thousand years, Miss Gallagher . . ."

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"Mrs."

". . . they've invented a thing called money. Dough. Scratch. Moolah."

"I'm aware of the concept of money," she said, her voice as frosty as a windowpane in winter. In Minnesota, of course. Not in L.A.

"Then as you also know," I said, "money doesn't grow on trees. Minnesota and California may have different climates, but I doubt trees there are any better at growing it than they are here. Ours are only good at oranges, and even they can be a little spotty."

Her silence reminded me of a gas range set on simmer. Or maybe it was just the sound of a thousand miles of static boiling through the line.

I stuck my head out the window again, this time with the handset pinched against my shoulder and both hands on the grimy sill. The air was sour with saltwater and exhaust. The sky had a yellowish tint to it, as if DeMille had put a filter over it for an exterior shot for one of his CinemaScope epics. Vehicles groaned over the shimmering asphalt, cursing each other with their irritable horns.

The pigeon was trundling toward the sandwich during a lull in the traffic. With ten feet to go, the semaphore changed and a horde of coupes, sedans, and delivery trucks on Cahuenga surged toward it from both directions. The bird flapped and fussed its way to the safety of a crosswalk.

"I know where money comes from, Mr. Nash," she said, "and I know the price you have to pay for it."

If I'd had anything better to do, I'd have hung up, but L.A. was in the throes of a bout of good behavior. The summer weather had been unusually mild. Husbands had been coming home to their wives and guns had been staying snugly tucked in their nightstands. There hadn't been much need for the services of a private detective. But the Santa Ana winds had finally found their way out of the desert and had raced into the valley hellbent on stirring things up. I gave it twenty-four hours. Until then, my calendar was wide open.

"How did you get my name?"

"From Russell Eaves," she said.

My heart did a double take. Russ Eaves had been a war buddy of mine. We'd spent several memorable days and a few fuzzy nights together on leave in London, sharing everything but the women who entertained us. Another thing we didn't share was a ticket home. "How could Russ recommend me? He never left Anzio."

"I know that. He was my father."

My heart did another double take, then looked away. "Sorry. That's a tough break." I drew in a slow chestful of sour L.A. air. "What's this about?"

She hesitated. "I can't tell you everything over the phone, but before he died, my father sent my stepmother a letter from London that included a gift. A gold coin. A coronation coin for the crowning

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of King Edward V."

"Edward V was never crowned," I said. "He was murdered before the coronation took place."

She didn't seem to know that and took a couple of seconds to get back on track.

"Anyway," she said, "Dad told my stepmother that it was very valuable and to keep it in a safe place. The coin was not with the letter I found, so I assume she hid it somewhere."

"And now your stepmother's dead."

"That's right. She died a month ago. Since then my stepbrother and I have been going through the house, trying to get it ready for sale. That's when I found the letter."

"Does your stepbrother know about the coin?"

A hissing silence over the line. "I never actually showed him the letter."

"So I take it that you two are close."

The pigeon had made it to the middle of the intersection. It clamped onto a slice of bread from the sandwich as a black Packard Clipper nearly clipped its tail. The bird dodged the car with a shuffle and a squawk, dropping the bread in the process.

"So why do you need me to come to Minnesota?"

"Your name was in the letter. My father said you were the only one to trust with the coin, the only one who knows its real value. And that if anything happened to him, to call you and to pay you whatever you asked."

Like the guy in the black hat in a Western who can silence a saloon just by walking in, the topic of money had pushed through the swinging doors. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"Well, Mr. Nash? How much?"

I hesitated. Which was the better bet: my fee or half the prospective value of the coin? I compromised.

"Two hundred bucks."

Twice my normal fee. I knew that sounded high, but the letters on the pebbled glass door to the office—Darrow Nash, Private Investigations—said I was a going concern. I'd seen enough of my fellow P.I.s, including one down the hall by the name of Marlowe, work too many cases for free. Maybe you do that for the odd local case, but take an expensive flyer on one telephone call from Minnesota? Not even for Russ Eaves's daughter.

"That much?"

She wouldn't have liked my answer, so I did my impression of Charlie McCarthy when Edgar Bergen takes a drink.

"Mr. Nash, are you still there?"

I looked out the open window at the Hollywood I knew by heart. "As long as I keep paying the rent."

"Fine. Two hundred dollars. You'll have to fly to Minneapolis and take a train to Glenwood."

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"I might not get there until after eleven o'clock tonight," I said.

"That's okay. We can meet at midnight at . . ." She let out a gasp and her words jumped through the line in double time. "He's here. Cabin Eight. Pezhekee Resort in Glenwood."

A man's voice rumbled into the background on her end of the line. She said something to him but I couldn't make it out. She'd covered the phone. After a moment, she whispered: "I need your help, Mr. Nash." It was panic, fear, and hope all wrapped up minus the bow. Then I heard a sound that a thousand miles couldn't disguise.

"Mrs. Gallagher?"

She'd hung up.

I scribbled a note to send a telegram before I left town. Then I went back to the window and looked down six stories to one of L.A.'s busiest crossroads. Cars whizzed by on either side of the pigeon as it poked at the white slab with its tiny beak. I'm not sure how much thought pigeons give to the consequences of greed, but this one seemed to decide that getting something for nothing—at least this time—wasn't worth the risk. It lifted its head from the bread lying limp on the sizzling pavement. Then with an angry and self-satisfied flourish, it slapped its wings at the sour, yellow air and flew up and out of the burning heart of Hollywood.

The crowd outside the bar of the Mayfair Hotel—mostly American men in drab dress uniforms and local women in tight tops and pleated skirts—spills out onto London's Stratton Street. A fast pulse of harmonies—The Andrews Sisters—spills out too. "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" mixed with laughter, catcalls, bottles breaking and the grunts of sporadic scuffles. The din of wartime delirium. Of being in a war zone, miles from home and—for now—still alive.

Russ slaps my shoulder with the back of his hand. "That's the guy." He points to a short, bald man with a greasy gray fringe. The man's clothes are so dirty they look solid in places.

Russ walks up and grabs the man's forearm, little more than bone covered by tired, baggy skin. "You still have it?"

For a moment, the man's watery eyes are dull and uncomprehending. Then they glitter and his lips spread wide to expose a picket fence of brown teeth.

"I shore do, governor. I shore do." His breath has legs and reaches my nose. Human dry rot. "I been saving it just for you."

Number Eight was the Honeymoon Cabin at Pezhekee Resort. It must have got its name from the fact that the only place inside big enough for human activity was the double bed. Everything else was the size of a tackle box: the main room, the bathroom, the bedroom, and the galley kitchen.

When no one had answered my knock, I'd taken the liberty of inviting myself in. I stood just inside a screen door badly in need of

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a new spring. "In the Mood" shimmied out of a console radio. Drawn, hunter-green dishtowel curtains breathed in and out with a warm, brooding Lake Minnewaska breeze.

I didn't need to see her body to know that Julia Gallagher was dead. I knew from experience that death has a presence. It loiters like a conspicuous, two-bit gangster who coolly chews on a matchstick while filling the air with his sour, remorseless exhale. He hadn't been hanging around long.

I dropped my Pullman case by the storm door and stepped carefully into the bedroom.

Death also brings whatever surrounds it into sharper focus. The bedroom was alive with details. The white lace runner on a tall, antique dresser. The upholstered flower-print seat on a white wicker chair. The ivory shade—decorated like a white man's idea of a tom-tom—hanging over the bedside lamp. The white linen sheets and pillowcases. The body on the bed.

I stepped into the narrow slot between the bed and the wall and laid the back of my hand on Julia Gallagher's cheek. Still warm. Fifteen minutes? Half an hour? Hard to tell. I checked my watch. Eleven fifty-eight.

Something on her cheek got my attention. I leaned in close. A faint discoloring grazed the surface of the orbital bone under her right eye. A bruise in its early stages. There was also a vague redness around her mouth and jaw and hairline scratches under her chin. But despite the minor damage, it was still a face most men would pay to see, the faint marks doing nothing to reduce the price. And her body, which deserved its own steep admission, would have been an added bonus any other time. But not now. Not when she was dead. I pulled the sheets up to her neck.

I moved to the other side of the bed to the end table with the Indian-drum lamp. On it sat a small clutch purse and a glass vial, the kind used for holding the sort of pills you don't get from a doctor. The vial was empty. I took a closer look at her pupils. Pinpricks.

If she hadn't called me that morning, I would have assumed she had killed herself, either on purpose or by accident. But the possibilities of the coronation coin had filled her voice with desperation and hope. And she'd asked for help. Not usually the sign of someone ready to take her own life. Whoever had murdered her had opted for accidental death over suicide. There was no note.

I took a handkerchief out of my back pocket and opened the purse. Not much, just a brush, keys, lipstick, eyeliner pencil, and a compact. A small black-and-white photograph with thick, white borders was tucked into an inside pocket. It was of a cheerleader and a football player. The cheerleader looked a lot like Julia. The football player looked a lot like Russ. Julia looked a lot like both of them.

I pulled out the compact and opened it with the handkerchief. The small circular mirror was dusty with makeup powder. But

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beneath the thin layer of dust I could see short dark lines like hen tracks. I lightly blew at the dust. The tracks became strings of tiny words scrawled on the mirror with eyeliner pencil. I didn't get the chance to read them.

Footsteps thumped on the small wooden landing leading to the front door of the cabin. Then the screen door screeched open. I snapped the compact shut, wrapped it in the handkerchief, and slipped it behind the wallet in my back pocket.

Determined boots clomped over the linoleum tile of the main room. Then a cop with no hat stepped into the doorframe to the bedroom. The .38 Special he aimed at me looked like an early model.

"Don't even breathe." He said each word as if it deserved its own chapter.

I doubt he'd confronted many murder suspects at the scene of the crime in his significant—based on the lines on his face—years of rural law enforcement, but he showed the calm of a jeweler. The patch on his sleeve said "Pope County Sheriff."

He said: "Where should your hands be?"

I raised them.

His face was uneven and pockmarked, as if it had been fashioned out of clay by the clumsy thumbs of a novice sculptor. But his hair was star quality, thick and black and naturally wavy. Hair that women would instinctively run their fingers through while forgetting about his face.

He kept the gun aimed at me but dropped his gaze to the body on the bed. His thin lips pushed out together and his eyes frowned in disappointment. "Poor thing."

Another cop with no hat appeared over the sheriff's shoulder. He had the face of a character actor in his mid thirties, handsome until you looked a little closer. That's when you noticed his square jaw wasn't square enough, his blue eyes weren't blue enough, and his sandy hair wasn't thick enough. But what dropped him from character actor to extra was his nose. It was flat on the bridge and swelled out on the tip like the surplus dough left at the end of a rolling pin. A .45 filled his holster.

His eyes fell to Julia and he shook his head. His face screwed up into a welt of pain. Then he turned and hurried out of the room. I could hear him gasping and fighting back tears as the screen door squealed, then slammed shut.

The sheriff sized me up. "Let's play follow the leader." He jerked his gun toward the main room. "You start."

"Aye, aye, captain." I led him into the room without any dead bodies in it. The sheriff holstered his gun and turned off the radio. I left my hat on.

The room's decor looked like it had been cut from a pattern found in *Field and Stream.* The walls were paneled in pine planks thick with shiny varnish. The floor was covered by industrial-strength tiles

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that had lost their shine from decades of shoes and sand. A scattering of tea-colored wicker chairs and a wicker settee were strewn about the small room like an exhausted road crew at the end of a long, hot day. I took a seat in a wicker rocker and expedited the interrogation.

"Name's Darrow Nash. I'm a private detective from Los Angeles. Mrs. Gallagher called me this morning and asked me to meet her here tonight." I jerked a thumb towards the bedroom. "That's how I found her."

He looked at me like a traffic-court judge. "You got anything to back that up?"

I took out my wallet and gave him the celluloid sleeve holding my driver's license on one side and a photostat of my P.I. license on the other. He studied them closely. "This doesn't prove you didn't kill her."

I pulled two tickets out of my suit jacket and handed those to him. "Airline and train. Add them together and you come up with too late."

He examined the tickets.

"My train got in to the Glenwood Depot at eleven-thirty. Then I got a lift from a farmer by the name of Ole Isdahl. He let me off here no more than ten minutes ago. I haven't even checked in yet. He said his wife was going to visit relatives in some place called Thief River Falls. That enough detail to back me up?"

He handed me my papers. His face was grim. "I know Ole. And I know Johanna was leaving tonight to visit her mother." He turned and slowly walked away from me with one hand massaging the back of his neck. "Her mother has consumption." He stopped in the doorway to the bedroom and stared at Julia Gallagher. "No note."

"She called me this morning and said she needed help. She wasn't kidding."

The hand stopped massaging and clung to the back of his neck as if hanging on for dear life. "Poor thing."

I aimed a thumb at the door. "What's with your partner? His first homicide?"

The sheriff kept his eyes on Julia. "Glen Eaves." He lifted his chin toward Julia. "That's his stepsister."

Eaves sat on the wooden front step to the cabin, leaning forward with his forearms on his knees as he looked off toward Lake Minnewaska. Any tears he might have shed were gone from his cheeks.

The sheriff spoke to him through the screen door. "You okay, Glen?"

"Yeah," he said without taking his eyes off the darkened lake. "I just can't imagine why she'd let this happen."

I studied his sullen profile from over the sheriff's shoulder.

"I know she had some problems," he said, "but I never thought she'd let it go this far."

No one said anything for a moment. I didn't like the silence. "Who found her?"

The sheriff answered first. "Glen did. About half an hour ago.

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Then he ran to get me."

"Any signs of a struggle?" I said.

Eaves turned and looked over his shoulder at me with an expression that said I must be a sap. "Who the hell are you?"

The sheriff answered for me. "Darrow Nash. He's a P.I."

Eaves wasn't impressed. "It was an accident, Nash. The vial was empty. Pump her stomach and you'll find enough pep pills to kill the Fighting Seabees."

"When did you see her last?"

"She was at the house today, cleaning, boxing things up, digging through stuff. My mother died a few weeks ago." He put his hands to his face. "Why is all this happening to me?"

"Did you find a note?"

Eaves jumped to his feet. He leaned toward the screen door. "Why would she leave a note? It was an accident. Nobody beat her up, nobody shot her, and nobody broke her neck. It was the narcotics. What more proof do you need?"

The sheriff pushed the door open and stepped out. "Take it easy, Glen." He grabbed Eaves by the arm and led him toward the lodge. "Nash is a private dick. He can't pound sand without asking questions. I need you to do something for me."

As he let the sheriff steer him away from Cabin Number Eight, Eaves gave me a good long look before dismissing me with a flick of his wrist. I tried not to smile.

The peddler holds the coin up in his dirty fingers. "It says right on it '1483' and 'Edwardus Quintus.' *One of the two princes in the Tower murdered by that bloodthirsty usurper Richard III, or so they say. I have it on good authority, governor, that this here coin is from the museum." He gives us another look at the brown picket fence in his mouth.*

"The British Museum?" Russ's eyebrows shoot up.

"Aye."

Russ looks at me, his icy blue eyes flickering in the glow of a streetlamp, his lips stretched in a smile of anticipation. His hair is short and straw-colored. His face is the type that will always look younger than it really is, unblemished, stubbled with whiskers so blond and sparse that they're almost invisible.

"So it's stolen?" I say.

The peddler winks. "It's wartime, governor."

A roar rises from the crowd in the street as a fight breaks out. Too many soldiers, too few women.

Russ digs into the back pocket of his dress-uniform pants. His eyes grow hard and panicked at the same time. "My wallet's gone." He snaps a look behind him at the way we'd come, as if the pickpocket might still be lingering at the scene of the crime, counting his loot. "Son of a bitch."

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"How much?"

"About seventy bucks."

"That's a month's pay. Why were you carrying so much?"

As he stares back toward where we'd been, Russ's face softens and he accepts his fate. Then he turns to me and smiles. "Living for now, Darrow. Living for now."

The heavy night air clung to my back as my suitcase and I followed them at a safe distance across the manicured lawn toward the main lodge of Pezhekee Resort. Lake Minnewaska, lying forty yards off to the right, was nearly invisible in the blackness except for tiny dots of light from the far shore that glistened like tears on its shifting face. A travel-worn breeze made the large oaks and elms sigh in whispers and carried with it a hint of wood smoke from a distant campfire, but it did nothing for the heat. Just rearranged it.

The sheriff sent Eaves off to the left toward the parking lot behind the lodge and waited for me to catch up. From there, we headed for the lobby.

His name was Dan Parrish. He'd been the Pope County sheriff for ten years, and a Glenwood cop for the ten before that. Glenwood was his hometown. He walked at a heavy-footed, deliberate pace as if he needed to be somewhere but needed some time to think before he got there. He ignored my efforts at trying to pick up the pace.

The lodge was wide, with two stories, two dormers, and a large sun parlor tacked to the side closest to Cabin Number Eight. A string of first-floor porch windows along the entire front of the building kept an unblinking eye—a dozen of them—on the lake. The main entrance sat beneath a portico that extended ten feet out from the left side of the porch.

We walked up four steps covered in red outdoor carpeting and stopped at a storm door with a screen in it that led into the porch. Behind it was a polished oak door with a large oval window. The oak door was locked, but a sign said to press the buzzer for after-hours check-in. We never got the chance.

A woman was crossing the lobby at a fast walk. She was within a handshake of fifty. Her gray-streaked hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she wore jeans and a short-sleeved gingham shirt with red-and-white checks. Her face was tanned and weathered, making her look her age, but giving her an earthy sensuality.

She crossed the porch and pulled the oak door open. "I saw your squad, Dan," she said. "What's wrong?"

Parrish took her elbow. He steered her into the main lobby and led her toward the back near the registration desk. There, he began to tell her in quiet tones what we'd found in Cabin Number Eight. She held her hand over her mouth as she listened.

As I waited, I scanned the lobby of the Pezhekee Resort. It wasn't very big, but it was just what a private dick from L.A. would imag-

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ine a Minnesota resort to be: miles of wood paneling, heavy beams, overstuffed couches, braided rugs, built-in bookcases, and hanging lights with antler shades. One wall was taken up by an oversized fieldstone fireplace with a thick, rough-hewn beam for a mantel. A pendulum clock hung near the door behind me. It broadcast loud, ponderous ticks that made resort life seem interminable.

Off to the left was a sun parlor that housed a piano, more braided rugs, and a scattering of white wicker chairs. A darkened dining room lay to the right. The smell was classic resort lobby, a sweet mixture of wood polish and wood smoke.

Parrish brought the woman over to me. She looked upset but capable of handling a crisis.

"Darrow Nash, this is Clare Henry. Her father started this resort in nineteen fifteen."

We shook hands. Hers was stronger than mine.

"Mr. Nash," she said. "Welcome to Pezhekee Resort. I took your call this morning for your reservation. Can I check you in?"

"Any room," I said, "but Cabin Number Eight."

She didn't smile. I didn't expect her to.

As I checked in the sheriff made some calls. When he was done, he flipped on the dining-room lights and we sat down at the nearest table. The dining room was large and paneled in knotty pine and illuminated with light fixtures that looked like Indian drums. They hung by chains from large square beams that ran across the ceiling. The beams were held up by square wooden poles with support arms that angled up and gave me a picture of what the Indians must have looked like as they were marched off this land at gunpoint.

Clare Henry came out of the kitchen carrying a tray with a pot of coffee, some cups, and two slices of rhubarb pie. "Something to tide you over." She set the tray on the table and handed me a piece of paper. "And I'm sorry, Mr. Nash, but in all the commotion I forgot that a telegram had come for you earlier this evening."

"Thanks, Clare," Parrish said.

I thanked her too and slipped the telegram into the breast pocket of my suit jacket where other men stuff tufted handkerchiefs.

"Dan, is there any way we can keep this quiet?" She gently placed each item on the table as she gazed at the rugged terrain of the sheriff's face. "I don't want the other guests to be upset by all this."

"We'll do what we can. I sent Glen Eaves for the coroner and they should be here soon. Once the coroner's done, we'll have Julia's body taken to the hospital. We should be out of here by sunup. But Number Eight should be left as it is. We'll need to look at it some more."

"Thanks, Dan." She squeezed his shoulder. He patted her hand. I got the sense it wasn't the first time they'd squeezed and patted.

"She runs this place by herself," he said as he watched her walk away. "There's a staff, of course, but she's in charge. Her husband Jack died about three years ago."

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"She looks like she might want someone to fill the vacancy good old Jack left behind." After I said it, I noticed the ring on his finger. He noticed me noticing the ring on his finger. He gave half a smile and flicked ashes into the ashtray. I let that be his answer.

"Did she see or hear anything?"

"No," he said. "Number Eight is off on the sun-parlor side. It's hard to see from there. Especially at night."

The pie was sour, the coffee black. I was beginning to like Minnesota resorts. "I don't suppose you get many murders around here."

"No. This is the first one since I've been on the force. But it's this kind of thing that makes me glad I'm sheriff. Some cops just want the file to go away as soon as possible. That's not me."

"That's Eaves."

He nodded. "Never met a first impression he didn't like."

"Did you know Julia Gallagher?"

"Sure, everyone did. Young. Pretty. Married Pete Gallagher, the captain of the football team, right out of high school. Then the wheels fell off. She became what people in these parts call a fallen woman."

"How far did she fall?"

"She became a stripper on skid row in Minneapolis. Worked all the clip joints down there. Drank too much. Probably narcotics, too."

"How did she end up there after marrying the captain of the football team?"

"Hard to tell. Fleet Pete—that was his nickname—was recruited by the Gophers and went down to the Cities to play for them but quit after his first year. Homesick, I guess. I think she thought he had his sights set higher than being a Glenwood farmer for the rest of his life. He came back here. She stayed there. I don't think they were ever formally divorced."

"What's he like?"

"Like any young man who realizes his best days are behind him. Angry. Bitter. He's a decent farmer, but when he gets a snoot full, he likes to disturb the peace."

A pair of headlights turned up the drive that led to the back parking lot, followed closely by another set. Parrish twisted his body as he watched the cars move slowly past the sun-parlor windows across the lobby from the dining room. "Coroner's here. Eaves, too."

Then he stubbed out his cigarette with a pointedness that said we were done.

Parrish wanted to monitor the coroner's work. Apparently, the man was a local M.D. who'd never cared for postmortems and gave the effort to match. But before we left the lodge I stopped in the Men's room. It wasn't the coffee or the pie that sent me in there.

The door was a paneled job that I locked behind me. The room itself was small and spotless, just a stool, a sink, and a mirror.

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Black and white asphalt tiles the size of record sleeves for forty-fives were laid out in a checkerboard fashion. The walls—more shiny knotty pine—were too clean, lacking any telephone numbers, lewd drawings, or dirty words. Even the air was too clean, scouring my nostrils with ammonia and floor wax.

With the handkerchief, I carefully pulled the compact out of my back pocket. I made sure I didn't get my fingerprints on it, even though I knew that by taking it I had compromised its value in court.

For a second I thought the words had vanished, but more make-up powder had been pressed against the mirror while it had been closed. I gently blew the powder away. The words assembled themselves into Julia's voice.

"I put my trust in you."

The bathroom floor and walls tipped like a boat descending a wave. I pressed a hand against the wall so I wouldn't capsize, then put down the toilet lid and sat on the stool. My breathing came out as if someone was doing it for me and didn't know the rhythm I liked.

She'd known she was going to die. May even have been dying when she wrote it. On the telephone that morning she'd said I was the only one she could trust, and I'd shown up too late to save her. On time for our meeting, but still too late.

I took a few deep, deliberate breaths and rose carefully to my feet. I wrapped the compact up in the handkerchief and stuffed it in my back pocket again. Then I remembered the telegram. I sat down again and read it. News I hadn't expected. News that becomes tragic when somebody dies.

When I left the Men's room and navigated my way through the empty dining room tables, the floor was still choppy.

"You feeling okay?" Parrish said as I met him on the porch. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine." I pushed open the screen door and we stepped out under the front portico and started down the steps.

A man came running toward us from out of the darkness near the road that hugged the shore of the lake. A Ford truck built in the 'thirties was parked at an angle on the grass, its driver's-side door still open. The man ran with an effortless grace and fluidity usually reserved for animals that choose flight over fight.

"Sheriff." He grabbed Parrish by both arms. His words came out awkward and flat. "Where is she? Is she okay?"

His hair was closely cropped and as thick and brown as the hide of a deer. His work boots were untied and his clothes—a hunter-green work shirt and tan work pants—hadn't seen soap since Roosevelt's second term. The hands he used to grip the sheriff's shoulders were thick and scabbed.

"Pete Gallagher, this is Darrow Nash." Parrish tilted his head my way. Gallagher let loose of the sheriff and we shook hands. His grip was soft and weak like he was handling rice paper. You didn't need

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to kiss him to smell the whiskey.

He turned back to Parrish. "Is she okay?"

"No, Pete," said the sheriff. "She's not. I didn't want to tell you over the phone, but Julia's dead."

Gallagher stared at Parrish's face. The farmer's head bobbed slightly as if floating on the whiskey he'd consumed, waiting for the sheriff to wink, to smile, to do something to make it all one big joke. When Parrish didn't respond, Gallagher moved stiffly to the steps and sat down. I expected him to begin sobbing, but he never let out a sound. His face was expressionless, almost lifeless, like the facade of a vacant house.

Parrish crouched in front of him. "You need anything?"

Gallagher shook his head. His face was pale even in the timid glow from the porch light.

"Pete, as hard as it might be, I need you to identify her body."

Gallagher dropped his head and nodded. "Okay."

Parrish hesitated. "How much have you had tonight?"

Fleet Pete looked up. His spine hardened into granite but his head still floated free. "Enough to get me through this."

"Is that your alibi?"

"Alibi? I was at home, remember? That's where you called me." He looked toward the lake as if it might share his irritation. Then he turned back to Parrish. "You think I did this?"

"Pete, I'm the sheriff. I've got a job to do. For this county and for Julia."

The granite spread to the farmer's thick shoulders and his balled fists. He stood up. "Just show me where she is."

Eaves and the coroner were in the bedroom when the sheriff and I walked into Cabin Number Eight. The air inside had soured, leaving an aftertaste of heat and death. Gallagher waited outside until Parrish was ready for him.

Parrish stuffed his hands into his pockets. "What do you think, Ernie?"

Ernie was the coroner, a fat man whose nose whistled with each breath. He had a tuft of black hair on his head that was slicked back with too much hair tonic. He had a tuft of black hair on his upper lip that looked like a caterpillar. He wore a dark blue suit that might have fit him when he went to the prom a dozen years ago, but was now stretched so tight between his shoulders as he bent over the victim that you could have bounced a buffalo nickel off of it.

Ernie stood up straight. His glasses were propped on his forehead but he settled them back on his nose to look at the sheriff. "No signs of a struggle. Pupils constricted. Empty pill bottle. Gotta be a fatal dose of narcotics."

"That's what I've been saying," said Eaves with a glance toward the sheriff.

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"What about the bruise?" I said.

Ernie cocked his head like a spaniel. "What bruise?"

"The one on her right cheek. And the red marks around her mouth and under her chin."

Everyone leaned in for a closer look. Ernie propped the glasses back on his forehead and bent over Julia's face. "Well, I'll be darned." He stood up with a self-satisfied smile, as if he'd been the one to spot the ghostly blemishes. He looked at me. "Ever thought of becoming a coroner?"

"No," I said nicely. "Have you?"

His smile vanished. He dropped the glasses on his nose again, then picked up a camera off the floor and took one last picture, probably for his photo album. He stuffed the camera into a small satchel. "I'll give you my report tomorrow, Sheriff." As he stepped past me, he gave me a look like something about me tasted bad.

With Russ's wallet gone, the peddler begins to walk away.

Russ grabs the man's arm. "Wait. I can get the money."

He gives me a big, mischievous smile. "I know they say to never lend money to friends, Darrow, but . . ." He bats his eyelashes at me.

"I don't buy plunder," I say.

"No, but I do. I'll pay you back. I promise."

With a smile and a shake of the head, I give him the twenty he needs.

As we walk back down an alley toward our hotel, Russ admires his gold coin. "This could be worth a fortune."

"Or it could be a fake."

"Yeah, but I like what it says."

"Edwardus Quintus?"

"No. What it means. It says, 'Don't look too far down the road.' It was struck in honor of a king who didn't live long enough to be crowned. It says what I always say, Darrow. Live for now."

He slaps me on the back and lets out a laugh that echoes off the alley walls.

The next week he mails the coin home for safekeeping.

The week after that he's dead.

I never got my twenty bucks back.

Parrish opened the screen door and told Gallagher he could come in. Gallagher swallowed a couple of deep breaths, then stepped into the cabin. He and Eaves were brothers-in-law, but they said nothing to each other. They didn't even make eye contact. Gallagher wasted no time before he entered the tiny bedroom.

He strolled in, walked up close to Julia, and stared at her face. Then he reached down and ran a gentle thumb over her right cheek. After a moment, he straightened up and turned toward the bedroom door, but kept his eyes on the floor. "That's her." He strode out of the bedroom and headed for the screen door. Parrish and

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Eaves watched him go.

I caught up to Gallagher outside. He had stopped to swallow some fresh air and was staring toward the black void of Lake Minnewaska.

"Cigarette?" I said as I held out my open pack.

He looked at the pack, then at me. It took him a moment to decide whether a free Camel was worth having to stand and make small talk with me. He grunted, then fingered one out of the pack. I lit his and one for myself.

I watched him through the smoke. "Your wife?"

"We were married for three years," he said as if repeating something he'd heard but didn't entirely believe. He held his cigarette between his thumb and index finger, his gaze lost in the wide-open darkness of the lake.

"How much of the three years were you together?"

His eyes dropped down to study the Camel burning in his left hand. "Six months."

"Had you seen her recently?" I gestured toward the cabin with my cigarette. "Before in there?"

He gave me a sideways glance. "You a cop?"

"No, just an innocent bystander."

He gave that a thought. "Then it's none of your damn business."

I let him feel good about sticking it to me for a very long two seconds. Then I hurt his feelings. "Are you left-handed?"

He turned to face me. The granite began filling his shoulders again. "What kind of a question is that?"

"A simple one. You hold your cigarette in your left hand. Most people smoke with their dominant hand." I shrugged. "You do the math."

He looked down at his left hand as if he didn't believe me. The Camel fumed between his finger and thumb like a guilty schoolboy. "Yeah, buddy, I'm left-handed." He threw the cigarette to the ground and started back toward his truck parked near the lake.

I let him take a few strides—another very long two seconds—to think he was home free.

"You also used your left hand to touch the fresh bruise on her right cheek."

He stopped ten yards away, then slowly turned to face me. "So what?"

"So I was just wondering what kind of a man belts his wife."

His breathing quickened and his body twitched as if waiting for someone to hike the ball so he could charge me.

"Don't do it, Pete," Parrish said through the screen door. Gallagher seethed but didn't move. "Answer Nash's question. Did you hit her?"

Gallagher's fists clenched and unclenched as he glared at me. The buzz of insects filled the trees.

"Did you hit her?" More insistent this time.

The tension in Gallagher's body reached its peak. Sweat popped

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up on his forehead. Then, like an overly tightened watch, his springs finally sprung. He let out a long breath. His shoulders sagged by slow degrees as the granite inside him began to erode. "She came back to our house."

"When?"

"Tonight, around ten-thirty."

"What did she want?"

"She said she'd found her meal ticket—that's what she called it—and that she was leaving for good." His words grew heavier as he went on. "I offered to go with her but she just laughed at me. She said I'd probably just run away again. That I'd been running away ever since high school. She said you"—he thrust a thumb at me—"were going to help her sell something."

Parrish pushed through the screen door, followed by Eaves. The sheriff stepped off the front step and stood in the sparse grass, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. Eaves stopped near me with his hands on his hips.

"What happened after you hit her?"

The granite crumbled and his head dropped forward. "She dug around for a family picture and left."

"What did you do?"

"I did what I always do. I ran away. Just like she said." He sighed. He had started swaying slightly, as if the alcohol had finally reached his legs. "This time I did it without leaving the kitchen table."

His bottom lip began to tremble and his hands began to shake. His words stumbled out as if they'd been strung together from different sentences. "I wasn't there when she needed me the most." The sobs came in waves, churned up from somewhere deep within his hay-baler's frame, and he fell to his knees.

Parrish rushed over and crouched beside him, massaging a hand over the former captain's back. "None of us were there when she needed us, son. None of us."

The sobs continued to rattle Gallagher's body.

Clare Henry came running across the lawn from the lodge. "Is he okay?"

Parrish stood up. "Clare, can you take Pete inside? He might need some coffee."

She bent down and Gallagher draped an arm over her shoulder. She put her arm around his waist. As they walked slowly back toward the lodge, he staggered beside her like an injured football player being led off the field for the last time.

Parrish began massaging his neck again. His head was tilted forward as he looked over at me. "Hell, maybe it was accidental."

Eaves snorted. "Finally."

I used my tongue to work a sliver of rhubarb out from between two bottom molars. I shook my head.

Eaves moved a step closer to me. "What more evidence do you

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need, Nash?"

"None." I pulled the compact out of my back pocket. It was still wrapped in the handkerchief.

Eaves propped his hands back on his hips.

Parrish stopped massaging his neck. "What the hell is that?"

"A compact I found in Julia's purse."

The sheriff aimed his eyes at me like there were bullets in the sockets. "I took you to be smarter than that, Nash. Smarter than to tamper with evidence."

"There's writing on the mirror."

Eaves opened his mouth and Parrish's eyes widened. Eaves spoke first. "What does it say?"

I led them back through the screen door and into the main room of the cabin where there was light. I opened the compact with the handkerchief, blew powder off the mirror, and held it out for them to see. "It says, 'I put my trust in you.'"

Parrish took it from me, being careful to hold it with the thin white cloth. His jaw muscles throbbed as he studied the words. Then he passed it to Eaves.

Eaves cradled the compact and handkerchief in one hand but kept his eyes on me. "What does it mean?"

I took the compact from him. "Julia had been looking for a gold coin her father had sent home from London in nineteen forty-three. A coronation coin for Edward V that dates back to fourteen eighty-three."

Eaves's jaw tightened.

"She called me this morning to come out to help her find it. She must have found it before I got here."

"But she doesn't have it." Eaves propped his hands on his hips.

The sheriff straightened up. "How do you know that?"

Eaves didn't speak.

I did. "You were looking for the coin, too."

He hinted at a nod. "My mother showed me the letter a long time ago, but never told me where she'd hid the coin."

I held up the compact.

Recognition crept across his face like a looming shadow. "Let me see that." He snatched the compact from my hand.

"It's your mother's, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"She's the one who wrote, 'I put my trust in you.'"

"It almost sounds like a prayer," Parrish said.

"And Julia figured out what it meant. That the coin is hidden behind the mirror."

Eaves drew in a long, deep breath and slowly let it out as he paced away from us, holding the compact in front of him as if he were Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull, only without the monologue on death. He stopped in front of the wicker couch and held that pose for a moment. Then he turned toward us. As he did, he

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drew his .45 and aimed it at the sheriff. His eyes were aimed at me. "One of you makes a move and you're both dead. Nash, pull your gun out slowly and toss it on the couch."

I did as I was told, but not quietly. "Julia found the compact at the house. You suspected she had the coin and followed her here. Then you killed her. You forced her to swallow pills by holding her mouth shut."

"The pills were hers. She probably would have done it on her own. Now, Sheriff, it's your turn to disarm."

Parrish threw his gun next to mine. "I'll bet you were shocked when you looked in her purse and couldn't find the coin."

Eaves held up the compact. "I found it now."

"You killed your sister, Glen. Your sister, for God's sake."

"We shared no blood, Dan."

"Just the blood on your hands," I said.

Eaves eyed me as he moved to the wicker settee and picked up my gun with the handkerchief. He tucked his own gun back in its holster. Then he placed the compact on the hard tile floor and ground his heel into it, snapping the plastic shell into a dozen pieces. He ground harder and I heard the high-pitched crack of the mirror. He bent down and gently fingered the pieces of the broken compact, never looking away from us. When he stood up, he showed us the gold coin and smiled. "You can't make me emotional about this. Julia and I were like strangers."

"You shouldn't be smiling," I said. "You killed her for nothing."

"A rare coin isn't nothing. It's a fortune."

"Not when it's a fake."

Eaves leveled his gaze at me. "It's not a fake."

I glanced down at the telegram sticking out of my breast pocket. "That's from the British Museum. I sent them a telegram this morning asking if any Edward V coronation coins had been stolen from the museum during the war or if any actually existed. They said no, that it must be a forgery. Forgeries were common during the war, they said, thanks to a lot of greedy Yanks."

He studied the coin resting in his palm as if he were a numismatist. "It's real. It has to be real."

Before he could look up, I charged him. His gun rose and fired but missed me. I hit him in the chest with my shoulder and drove him into the wicker settee. The thin wooden strips snapped like kindling and we crashed to the floor. The gun clattered across the hard tiles. He'd taken the worst of the hit and was struggling to regain his breath, but his arms kept flailing at me. I gave him a pair of rights that Joe Louis would have been proud of but they hardly fazed him.

I was hoping Parrish would jump into the fray, but a glance showed me his body on the floor and blood seeping along the cracks between the tiles.

Eaves regained his focus and the fight turned. He got a reversal

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on me and wound up on top. His fist caught me in the side of the head and forced stars into my eyes.

Then I heard a scream. It wasn't mine.

Someone said, "Eaves." It must have been Parrish because it came out as a groan, one that was both a curse and an accusation.

As my head swirled in the heavens, I watched Eaves draw back his arm like an arrow with a fist for a tip. Then he let it go. I waited for the impact, but it never came. His knockout punch had been intercepted by another arm, one that spun the cop around and fed his teeth a series of jabs. Eaves crumpled to the floor as blood streamed from his nose and mouth. Pete Gallagher stood over him, his fists the size of fieldstones, his veins the size of ropes.

Clare Henry knelt over Parrish. She was talking to him and he was talking back. Gallagher helped me up and we checked on the sheriff. Parrish had been hit in the shoulder. He turned his sights on me. "Next time you're going to try to be a hero, let me know. I'll duck."

I looked over at Eaves. The cop was flat on his back, his arms flung out to his sides, the coin lying lifeless in his palm. His face was turned away from me as air limped in and out of his chest. His uniform was darkened in spots by sweat and blood. The blood on his badge was beginning to dry.

A month later I received a telegram:

WESTERN UNION
LONDON ENG 1045A
MR DARROW NASH
CAHUENGA BLDG LOS ANGELES CA
RECEIPT OF PACKAGE CONFIRMED..ON BEHALF OF THE BRITISH GOVT THANK YOU FOR THE RETURN OF THE CORONATION COIN OF EDWARD V. AS THE BARD SAID, "HOW QUICKLY NATURE FALLS INTO REVOLT WHEN GOLD BECOMES HER OBJECT." YOUR SELFLESS ACTIONS PROMOTE DIGNITY AND ORDER. WOULD THAT A THANK YOU EQUALLED THE VALUE OF THE RETURN OF SUCH A PRICELESS TREASURE.
WITH KIND PERSONAL REGARDS.
REGINALD CLAY—CURATOR—BRITISH MUSEUM

I never got my twenty bucks back. And I never collected my two hundred dollar retainer.

Twice my normal fee. ●

HONORING THE BAKER STREET IRREGULARS: For the 65th consecutive year copies of an *EQMM* winter issue will be distributed at the annual Baker Street Irregulars banquet, to help the world's oldest Sherlockian organization celebrate the January 6th birthday of Sherlock Holmes. This year, in our February issue, we've included a rare Holmes pastiche by Edward D. Hoch and a tale featuring Steve Hockensmith's Old Red, ardent admirer and follower of Holmes.

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The Cream Treatment

by Jeffry Scott

Mary Paraly coaxed, "Go on, Father, tell him about that bad business at Cherry Garth. 'Twas so long ago it doesn't matter him knowing."

Mrs. Paraly often addresses Jim as "Father," though he is her husband. It started when their children were little and she couldn't get out of the trick of it, is her excuse. For twenty years or more Mr. Paraly was Police Constable Paraly, imposing the weight and majesty of the law on several Wessex villages while taking that, and indeed himself, very seriously. I suspect that Mary started the "Father" thing as a gentle reminder that Jim had a human role out of uniform.

The pseudonymous Jeffry Scott, who's been writing for *EQMM* since 1972, always provides us with something a little unexpected, and never more so than in this new story. The former newspaper reporter and editor, who traveled the world for many years in pursuit of news stories, settles us comfortably in the English countryside for this tale on the cozy side.

Jim and Mary are just about my oldest friends, in both senses of the term, but there's another reason for regular visits. You cannot write crime fiction—well, I can't—without straw for the bricks of imagination. Coppers are full of plots and twists they think of as anecdotes. Plus random stuff, often trivial to them yet priceless for you-had-to-be-there reasons. Inside information that an outsider has no chance of dreaming up.

Frustratingly, ex-PC Paraly was a potential gold mine, but the shaft was sealed. Police officers sign up to the Official Secrets Act and it is supposed to be open-ended. Moreover, Jim prides himself on not being a gossip. Pumping, whining, or badgering alike had been wasted breath—until now.

So when they had one of those short, unspoken exchanges long-married couples tend to go in for, and he conceded, "Well, mebbe I *could* tell the tale," my little heart went pit-a-pat . . . especially after Mary confided, "What Betty Barney did was murder, so listen hard."

More loudly, Jim being tetchy about people mumbling—not that he's getting deaf, what an idea—she began, "This was when the

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Barneys had Cherry Garth Farm. Where all those bungalows are, t'other side of the river? That was a fine farm, though you'd never guess it now.

"I dare say it broke Tom Barney's heart to make a mint of money for losing the place. House knocked down, some of the best grass in the county built over." She grinned maliciously. "I'm not entirely joking, my dear. There'd be Friesians there yet; I love the sight of a black-and-white herd and so did Tom. Much good that did him—not to say Betty wore the trousers but she told him when he had decided anything, and explained what that might be. Assertive, they call it now, but we spelt that bossy when I was a girl."

Jim pursed his lips. "Now, now, Betty wasn't so bad. Not until that girlie properly soured the milk for her, drove her a bit barmy."

"Nice as pie," his wife agreed. "Provided everything went as she wanted. Betty did the flowers in church and ran the Women's Institute—though she would have won all the cookery competitions even if the judges hadn't been scared of getting in her bad books. She was clerk of the parish council and lord knows what all besides. Oh yes, queen bee in these parts.

"It's no good huffing and frowning, Father, I am only telling the truth. I *liked* the woman—" Mary broke off to wag a finger at me for chuckling. "Me and Betty Barney got on real well, ask anybody. But I saw her clear, there's no law against noticing that friends aren't perfect."

"I reckon we've heard enough about your great friend Betty." Jim Paraly's heavy sarcasm suggested that for once he was eager to Tell All, or at least get more than a word in edgeways. "Tom and Betty had just the one child, see. For Betty the sun rose and set on their Gordon. I'd have been proud of him, too. Good-hearted, never any trouble, but not a goody two shoes. Clever as well; sailed through the grammar school entry exam. Some lads would have got big-headed, start thinking they were a cut above. . . . He didn't."

"Popular," Mary summed up needlessly, "and naturally Betty Barney had plans for him. She'd got into the habit from years of running Tom. Had that boy's future mapped out while he was still in short trousers.

"She was like those kings and queens in the olden days, all out for useful marriages. And there was her Gordon and the Farrows' Sophie growing up like brother and sister only no blood ties. She must have rubbed her hands!"

Jim Paraly explained that the farm owned by little Sophie Farrow's parents was next-door to Cherry Garth. Knock down half a dozen fences, bridge a stream; and the two could be merged in a single holding . . .

"Betty and Winnie Farrow were cronies, in and out of each other's houses most days. Gordon and Sophie saw loads of each other when they were little—and after. Went to the same school till he passed

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for the Grammar, shared the same treats, and so on."

"The men got on fine, went fishing, drank together on market days, but Bert couldn't stand Betty," Mr. Paraly stated. "She had that one-holding notion from the start. First off, she wanted them to go halves on buying expensive gear both families could benefit from, combine harvesters and suchlike. Later it was, why not build a modern milking parlor at a halfway point, to serve both herds? That way they could save wages by keeping fewer herdsmen . . .

"Bert Farrow wasn't having it. Some of his machinery was from his father's time but he was a dab hand at making do and his relics kept going. As for the building idea—scheming to do somebody out of a job for the sake of a few hundred quid more in the bank every month didn't sit well with him. *He* knew where that idea came from . . ."

"Betty could have throttled him," Mary Paraly broke in, with relish. "But there's more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream." For reasons beyond me, the old girl tittered and then shook her head in self-reproof. "That will keep, I mustn't muddle you. Young Gordon loved the land and Sophie was the same. Straight home from school, into her rough clothes and off to feed her calves or help with haymaking. They were a matched pair if ever there was . . .

"Stars of the Young Farmers Club, they were. Gordon and Sophie were chairman and secretary, and they arranged all the social side, dances and barbecues. Betty counted on them becoming a real couple, churched and wed. Then Old Father Time would do his work and some fine day there'd be a Barney owning one big farm."

Mary twinkled at me. "You had to feel sorry for Bert Farrow—he wanted their Soph' to be happy and it was obvious what *she* wanted, so he was stuck. Betty would win in the end."

"She's right," Jim Paraly admitted, "for once. Betty was the sort as can play the long game if they must. Not that she meant to marry off Gordon for the sake of getting hold of next-door—but it was damned convenient him and Sophie being sweet on each other."

His expression turned sardonic. "And then when Gordon was seventeen or so and playing rugger for the County Colts, he went and got his nose broken and a couple of teeth knocked out, the way you do—"

"Horrible game, ought to be banned like bare-knuckle boxing."

"That flat nose stopped him being too handsome for his own good. What I'm trying to tell you is, Gordon went to the dentist at Gurnard Wells and it was all up with him. She told him to spit in the bowl—"

"Don't be so coarse, Father! Not true, either. Kim was just the receptionist, didn't have the brains to be a nurse."

"Kimberly Stottle was her name," Jim steam-rollered on. "Always tickles me, a stunner with an odd name, but it never worried young Gordie. Soon as he clapped eyes on her, that was it. Young Farmers had to get along without him, likewise Sophie. He was off to Gurnard Wells every chance he got. You couldn't blame him. Kim was . . ."

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While Jim honed praise, Mary dug me in the ribs. "Flashy-pretty in a cheap way, no denying, but that girl was next best thing to a nitwit."

"Radiant, I was going to say. Lit up a room, did Kimberly Stottle."

Unkindly amused, Mrs. Paraly jeered, "He means sexy, pardon the expression. You'd have sworn all the men—His Lordship here as well, shame on him—were wearing them kipper ties, only it was their tongues hanging out."

If the thing can be done, then Jim blew down the stem of his pipe with an air of dignified reproof before tamping a fresh load of baccy. "There she goes, exaggerating. Though fair play, Kim *was* a cracker and a peach. Once Gordon showed her off around the village, folk said good luck to him—wasn't as if he was breaking an engagement, more of an expectation, like. It hadn't got beyond friendship. No shame, no blame."

"That wasn't how his mother felt," Mary cackled. "My word, Betty was in a state. Poor Sophie too, though she took it better. When you're that fond of somebody you want them to be happy and Gordon was over the moon, so Soph' stood aside.

"Of course, Betty Barney put her foot down firmly, the very worst thing to do. Gordon was her son as well as Tom's, and he had her backbone. Would *not* be moved. And his precious Kimberly was one too many for Betty as well—" Breaking off, Mary bit her lip. "I said the girl had no more sense than a wet hen, but looking back, maybe she was deep-down clever *and* a ninny, both at once. Some are.

"From the outset she called Betty 'Mummy Barney,' like marrying Gordon was certain as day follows night. Fair drove Betty wild . . . Betty tried freezing her out, or being downright rude and nasty behind Gordon's back—she told me all about it—and Miss Kimberly Stottle just giggled . . ." Mary Paraly put on a gormlessly arch voice, "'Ooh, Mummy Barney, you *are* a tease!'

"Finally Betty laid out all the reasons Kim was wrong for Gordon. She knew nothing about farming and didn't want to know—ugh, all that mud and muck and getting up before daylight . . . She liked town life and there wasn't any at Cherry Garth. Kim loved music, if you can call that pop stuff music, and Gordon was tone deaf, Sunday morning at St. Peter's with the hymn-singing was a right ordeal for him. Loads of reasons, all making good sense, and Kim nodded away.

"But just when Betty thought she had got somewhere, the girl stopped nodding and gave her the goo-goo eyes instead. 'But Mummy Barney, I *lu-uu-uv* him,'" Mrs. Paraly mimicked again. "So there was no shifting either of them, and Betty's great plan was no-go. Oh, I did have to work hard not laughing every time she told me the latest."

"She's got a cruel side, my wife," Jim observed. "Mark you, it was about time that woman learned she couldn't always have her own way. Bound to happen, we all meet our match sometime or other. "But then"—he jabbed the fuming pipe at Mary—"*she* got this terrible idea in her head."

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"Well, what was I to think, Father?" And to me, "It was just like Treasure Island in St. Peter's that day. You know, the lad falls into the apple barrel and hears the pirates talking out of turn, never knowing he's there to hear it?

"I was in the vestry darning surplices and I must have dozed off. Next thing there was talk going on outside, and glass clinking, water sloshing. Betty come to fix the flowers and Sophie Farrow was helping her. I would have called out, but then Betty said, *'Don't worry your head about Kimberly Stottle, my dear.'*

"Ooh, the way she said that! Made me stay quiet, you may be sure. Sophie said summat, she was quiet-spoken and they were in church, after all. But I heard Betty all right. 'He's going away soon. He won't want Kimberly Stottle when he gets home again, not after I have finished with Madam.'"

Jim Paraly cut in, "National Service was still on, remember. Gordon had to go when he reached eighteen. They put him in the army and what with Korea and all that, he was in for the best part of three years."

"Never mind why he was leaving." Miffed at her drama being sabotaged, Mary was quite sharp. "Hearing that about *'not wanting her'* and *'when I have finished with her'* shook me up. Betty sounded so . . . calm and confident and pleased with herself. Determined, too, but she always was.

"They'd be coming into the vestry soon to wash out the vases in that little cubbyhole where the sink is, so I slipped out the back way and told Father all about it."

"Awkward," ex-PC Paraly commented. "I mean, it *could* have been a threat—"

"Confound you, Jim, it was a bloomin' threat." (Very strong language from Mrs. Paraly.) "I heard the way Betty came out with it."

"Have it your way—she always knows best, my wife—but a threat to do what, exactly? Nothing there worthy of police action. Besides which, if Betty Barney denied saying any such thing and wanted to know where my information came from, what then? Mary here wasn't about to stand up and accuse a good friend, let the whole village think her a hole-and-corner eavesdropper spreading wild stories . . ."

She turned a shoulder to him but conceded, "That is what spiteful folk would have made of it. All I could do was beg Father to keep an eye on Betty. Then Gordon was called up and off he went for basic training up North somewhere. That was when we both started fretting, admit it, Jim."

"'Twas strange," Mr. Paraly agreed. "I'm a great believer in character. People don't change overnight, nor in a twelvemonth, neither. Age mellows? What a joke—nasty ones get deeper set in their ways while the good 'uns go on as usual. That's why I can't abide the nonsense on TV, all them serials Mary won't miss a minute of. People being saints one minute and devils the next, just to help the story

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along, is silly enough to make a cat laugh."

"Your point?" I enquired. Let Jim Paraly detour to the flaws in TV fiction—he is tiresomely well informed on the soaps despite alleging hostile indifference—and we'd be lost.

He glowered at me. "I'm getting there. Gordon hadn't gone a week before Kim Stottle moved in at Cherry Garth with Tom and Betty. I saw her at the shop, she had stopped off to buy trashy magazines, taxi outside burning money while she chattered away.

"I didn't have to ask her what was up, just listen. Kind Mummy Barney was taking her in while Gordon did his army time. Couldn't bear the thought of Kim pining away on her own in a bed-sitter at Gurnard Wells, waiting for his letters. What she needed was home comforts . . . *Aye-aye,* I thought, *what is going on?* Taking pity on the fly in her ointment wasn't the Betty B. I knew."

Betty could be genial when it suited her, Mary Paraly confirmed, but patience with fools or forgiveness to enemies were not on her agenda. "The girl was an orphan *and* she knew which side her bread was buttered," Mary went on. "I wouldn't say Miss Kimberly was dead idle, she certainly slaved over her appearance. Not above half keen on working for a living though, put it that way. Move in with the Barneys, free meals and no rent to pay? Too far to Gurnard Wells for traveling there and back every day, so goodbye dentist—perfect excuse to chuck up her job. I'd have gone to Cherry Garth, in her shoes. If-so-be I was too stupid to ask myself what was behind it . . ."

"First and foremost," Jim Paraly argued, "making her a member of the family, good as, meant Betty Barney had given in. As young Kim must have seen it. That was the real bait.

"I could not believe that Betty would, um, do anything drastic. *That* wasn't in her either. Except that it isn't in anybody . . . until them as thinks so are proved wrong. What do friends, neighbors, loved ones usually say after a murder, for instance? Good old George or sweet Aunt Lizzie was the last person on earth they'd have expected to do such a thing . . ."

Although Mary Paraly shared that incredulity, she could not forget Betty Barney's tone when making a promise to Sophie. Nor could she ignore the fact that farms are highly dangerous places. (More so sixty years ago, with Health & Safety regulations in their infancy.) Machines can be treacherous, many of the tools are sharp, and animals may rebel.

Every year some local had a close shave: They were the lucky ones. At longer intervals something terrible occurred. And these were people well aware of the dangers, not townies. Like a certain Kimberly Stottle, eminently qualified for an accident . . .

Jim Paraly had ordered his wife to keep her trap shut. Talk spreads in villages, emotional blood-poisoning, and slander is a serious matter. Chances were it was all stuff and nonsense, anyway.

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Yet he was secretly uneasy.

As any good wife would have done, Mrs. Paraly swore to stay silent and keep her nose out of Cherry Garth Farm matters. Then, as even good wives will, she did what she thought best. Her excuse was that she had been visiting Betty Barney for years—both Gordon and Sophie Farrow addressed her as Auntie—and it would look very odd if she stopped doing so.

She and Betty had a weekly chinwag in the kitchen and Mary went home with a dozen fresh eggs from free-range fowls, often with scraps of straw or a leaf stuck to the shell, proving them genuine. Always paid for, PC Paraly insisted on that; he'd owe favors to nobody.

Kimberly wasn't around when Mary called. Gone back to Gurnard Wells to collect her final week's pay, an all-day job if you used the bus—it ran at three-hourly intervals and the journey took an age.

Mary Paraly had stayed awake for too many nights not to have her approach worked out. She was determined, "all innocent like, just talking," to let Betty know somebody guessed that all was not as it seemed. Wasn't it a worry—Mary suggested during small talk—that the daft girl might have an accident around the place? Not being wise to country ways, and head full of makeup and pop songs and that. "Just what you need, so busy and all, an invalid on your hands. And there'd be an investigation, most likely."

Betty nonplussed her by laughing good-naturedly. "Small chance of that, thank goodness. Madam never stirs far from the house. Won't go near the stock, of course. Not even the hens—I liked looking after them when I was her age. Not her! Tried showing her the ropes and she said the fowls were looking at her crosswise, reckoned they have cruel faces. As if hens *had* faces . . . She makes me smile, does Kimberly."

Mary took leave to doubt that. Reading her friend's expression, Betty Barney shrugged and pulled a face. "Can't say I am any fonder of her, but I am getting used to Madam. Not listening to her prattle helps, it's no worse than having a radio on all day. Or a budgie chirping. Bit o' company while Tom's in the fields, same as a budgie would be." Mrs. Barney sounded genuinely if grudgingly indulgent.

She slid a laden baking sheet into the oven and closed its door gently. "Now we can have a brew. Put the kettle on while I clear away." She'd been making pastry at the scrubbed pine table. Mary felt herself blush a few minutes later when Betty said playfully, "You are wondering what I am up to, giving that little chit house room, don't deny it."

"No! Well . . . I'd never have put you top of the tree for turning the other cheek." A game recovery: mutual liking was based on straight talk and a change of style would have roused the other woman's suspicion.

"Simple," Betty Barney claimed. "Now Mary, this is stric'ly between ourselves. Breathe a word of it and we shall fall out. . . . I

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have had my thinking cap on, and the long and short of it is I went about things wrong, saying that silly girl isn't fit to be his wife. He has to find out for himself and I intend that he shall."

Her Gordon and Kimberly Stottle had been courting for several months since he'd dropped poor Sophie, but what did that amount to, Mrs. Barney demanded. A total of a few hours a week, with his sweetheart always at her best.

"He hasn't had a chance to tire of her. My son's not wholly a fool, and given day after day here with Madam, she will get on his nerves. He has a week's leave when the training's over, and seven days with nothing but talk of how bored she is without him, or does he prefer her in pink or green and all that carry-on, should do the trick.

"He rings her from the barracks every night he can, and she does nothing but whine about missing him and can't he ask them to let him off the army on account of the hardship to her. If he isn't thoroughly sick of Kimberly by the end of his leave, I shall be very much surprised."

Persuasive, Mary considered. Young love can be too intense to blaze long. Sometimes a luckless pair discovered that after the honeymoon; sad, to say the least. ("I don't hold with all this living out of wedlock," she digressed, halting up the narrative, "but it can save no end of misery for some.")

PC Paraly's wife went home with her new-laid eggs and a lot to ponder. She was a little easier in her mind, though not much. Maybe Betty Barney's scheme was, as she vowed, to destroy Kimberly's appeal. Maybe. But Mary had played against Betty at countless village hall whist drives. The woman never betrayed clues to whether her cards were good or bad.

Meanwhile Jim Paraly discounted Mary's fears. Betty Barney wouldn't take extreme action against Sophie's detested rival—because it would not be necessary. He'd been in the army during World War II and remembered what uniform did to him and the rest. Attitudes altered, tastes changed, new friendships were forged, sometimes with available girls. He believed the process was similar in peacetime.

Distance, as the poet nearly wrote, can lend *dis*enchantment to the view. . . . Attractive as Kimberly was—in a backwater without strong competition—rookie Private Barney's absence might end her spell.

In any case, Miss Stottle would soon tire of living with her future in-laws at the back of beyond. Free board and lodging was all very fine, but Kim required makeup and fan magazines and lord knew what rubbish besides, and even she lacked the nerve to demand pocket money. He bet that she would be back among the fashion shops, hairdressing salons, and record stores of Gurnard Wells before Christmas.

Gordon came home briefly when basic training was over. "'Twas just as I said," his mother reported to Mary Paraly afterwards. "The

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poor lad was tired out after that long journey and thin as a rail—army food's terrible, he says. Madam was badgering him to take her to the disco at the Wells before his feet were under my table. You could tell he was fed up, and that was within ten minutes of her."

Wishful thinking, however: Gordon continued phoning and writing to Kim, and she remained under his parents' roof. "I hadn't bargained on Kim finding a job in the village," Jim admitted. "Worked afternoons in the post-office shop, and that took care of her pin money."

Quite soon Lance-corporal Barney, pleased with the new, lonely stripe on his sleeve, was home again. Embarkation leave this time, he'd been posted to West Germany. Kimberly Stottle wailed that it wasn't fair.

Both embarrassed and flattered by her grief, Gordon said he'd get leave before she knew it, possibly only four or five months hence . . . "Five months?" Kimberly shrieked. "That's dreadful, Gordie! Five months is . . . uh, ever so many weeks."

"Made the most ridiculous scene," Betty Barney told Mary Paraly. "Quite spoilt my Gordon's homecoming, carrying on that way. Sophie happened to drop in while he was home, he was ever so pleased to see her." *(Happened my foot,* the listener thought. *You arranged it.)* "Must have made a welcome change from precious Kimberly's tantrums and waterworks. But it's not too late to put things right and I told him so on the quiet. He could have Sophie back with a snap of his fingers."

"How did he take that?"

Betty scowled and changed the subject. In Mary's opinion the familiarity-breeding-contempt ploy was a failure—if indeed it had been the scheme and not camouflage for a more sinister checkmating of the interloper. Betty's overt confession had been a bit too glib for Mary's taste, and her concern revived.

PC Paraly was easy in mind, however. Things seemed to have settled down at Cherry Garth Farm; presumably its matriarch had accepted the inevitable. He took to asking, mock anxiously when Mary returned with her dozen eggs, whether Betty had pushed Kim into the combine harvester yet, or was it burial alive in the silage pit? Things jogged along, as they say in those parts, but there were developments. Gordon Barney, a full corporal by then, came back on leave from Germany. He consoled fretful Kim by pointing out that his National Service was nearly half over, only another year to go. But then the Korean War broke out and conscript service was extended.

"He didn't get nearer the fighting than Japan, a place called Kure where there was a big supply base," Mary recalled. "But he was the far side of the world and wouldn't be back in a hurry.

"I don't know whether she lost heart or just decided to, like, hibernate until he got back, but that girl changed. It was as much as Kim could do to put a comb through her hair, bother with a bit

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of lipstick, and that wasn't like her at all. Everybody said the life had gone out of her.

"Do her justice, Kim wasn't flighty. She loved Gordon right enough. Naturally, Betty tried persuading her to go dancing or see a film in Gurnard Wells and link up with her friends there—it'd cheer Kim up. Tom could run her there in the car, pick her up later, it was no trouble . . .

"Hah! Trouble for Kimberly Stottle, though. His cunning mum would be writing to Gordon that the girl played fast and loose behind his back. Only that fox didn't run; Kim wasn't interested, just sat around like a wet weekend, piping her eye over the latest letter from Japan.

"I told Betty straight, it was downright wicked to set such traps. Serve her right that all she'd done was prove that the girl was devoted to Gordon. Betty looked guilty and swore she'd just felt sorry for the kid and meant no harm. I could see she hadn't given up."

The change was so gradual that Mary Paraly took months to notice it. Doing her shopping in town and seldom using the village store with its higher prices, she saw little of Kimberly.

Then . . . "I was up by the war memorial and spotted Sophie Farrow going into the baker's. I called her name but she took no notice. When I looked again, a bit put out, it wasn't Sophie—it was Kimberly! From the back, with a beret on, you'd be hard put to tell one from t'other."

An expectant pause. Plainly Mr. and Mrs. Paraly were disappointed by what they considered a bombshell leaving me unimpressed. "Ah, he doesn't understand, you left that out, luv," said Jim. "The thing is, Sophie was bonny in her way but what you might call hefty."

"Big-boned," Mary amended loyally. "Not *fat* fat, but cuddly."

"Whereas Kimberly was slender—except where she wasn't," said Jim. He didn't smack his lips but there was a wistful glint in the eye. "Slender and well-turned. That was her advantage over the local girls Gordon was used to. This was before the diets craze and young lasses wanting to be stick insects. Most country girls ate hearty and it showed.

"Mary came home full of how Kim was putting on weight, but that was stale news. I'd look in the shop most days, what with buying baccy and the local paper, and I'd seen the way Kimberly was going. The double chin came first, then her whole face got rounder. And she kept growing—in every direction bar up, that's to say.

"No, she wasn't in the family way, if that is the conclusion you are jumping to."

"Wash your mouth out, nasty old man! She was a *good* girl, not even Betty could pretend otherwise."

Ex-PC Paraly nodded impatiently. "All I meant, it was eating hearty and not goings-on . . . Kim stopped painting her face so much and didn't bother with fancy hairdos and high heels, but that

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wasn't what had stopped her being belle of the ball. No, them extra pounds, a potato sack of them, turned her ordinary."

"All Betty Barney's doing," Mary crowed. "That woman could cook for England. I have a light hand with pastry but Betty left me for dead. Sponge cakes you had to keep a fork on to stop them floating up in the air, she was that good. And not just pastry—anything from Cottage Pie to Toad in the Hole was the best you'd ever taste.

"It came to me in a flash, that was what she'd meant in church that day, telling Sophie not to fret. I felt such a fool. Remember me saying there's more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream? Daft old proverb, only Betty *was* out to kill the cat that way, kill the romance anyway. Fatten Kim up and the spell would be broken, that was her game. Only another woman would think of it. Young fellows fall in love through their eyes, and fall out again if what they see don't please them."

"Kimberly getting portly, there's no other word for it, crept up on her," said Jim. "It wasn't like she ballooned out overnight. But Gordon had been away for so long that it was bound to be a shaker for him. Put him off Kim, though, if he was truly sweet on her? I couldn't see that happening."

"I could, and so could Betty Barney. She did it under my nose when I went up to Cherry Garth to check. Brazen, with a look daring me to say anything . . ."

Mary Paraly contrived to be late collecting her eggs, and she was still in the farm kitchen when Kimberly got back from work. Mary's nostrils had been twitching for quite a while. Steak and kidney pie, Betty informed her, coming along nicely.

Kimberly made an oddly matronly figure for a twenty-year-old, her shop overall straining at the buttonholes. When she went to her room to freshen up before the evening meal, Mary heard the staircase creak under the weight.

She and Kim, in a shapeless cardigan evidently borrowed from ample Mummy Barney, had been chatting for a minute when Betty apologised for being a bit behind with supper. "I know how sharp-set you must be, Kimmie, after serving all them customers. This'll tide you over." The scones, split open, were hot enough from the baking for thick butter to be melting fast as Mary watched.

"*Two* scones, mark you, four halves. Betty said something to me and next time I looked, the plate was empty and Kim was brushing crumbs off her cardie. Talk about the vanishing trick! Then Betty gave her meat pie with three veg and gravy, making my tummy rumble. 'Treacle pudding for afters, Kimmie, your favorite,' she said."

Kimberly's jaws were too busy for more than an eager nod. Walking Mary to the front gate, Betty Barney was a shade defensive. "Can't have her pining away waiting, Madam has to be built up."

Or as Mary put it, decades afterwards, "She'd got the poor girl hooked, same as those dreadful drug barons do. It was her plan

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from the start. Kim watched her weight when she moved in, but it would take a saint to resist Betty's food. After Gordon got that long posting overseas—well, I read a bit in a magazine once about comfort eating . . . The wretched girl had no chance."

It was late summer when Mary saw this non-force feeding in action. Gordon Barney was due home in December. November found Miss Stottle renewing interest in her appearance. She went to Gurnard Wells and invested in the latest hairstyle. She investigated a number of boutiques and fashion stores—and was observed leaving them looking crestfallen.

Alarmed too late, she went on a diet.

"Betty was all for it," said Mary, torn between amusement and indignation. "But she took to leaving strawberry shortcake and cheese straws and suchlike near the girl, and let nature take its course. . . . I saw them go by in the car, off to Handley Cross to meet Gordon's train, and my heart fair went out to Kim. She looked nearly as big as Betty, and Betty was a substantial woman."

"Porky," Jim Paraly affirmed, before relating the climax of the conspiracy. He heard all about it later from henpecked Tom Barney . . .

Once the ecstatic clinches were over, former Corporal Barney seemed subdued and thoughtful, making his mother smile. He sat in front, beside his father: not enough car room for three on the backseat, though once there had been.

Back at the farm, Kimberly held Gordon's hand at every opportunity. A watchful, secretly gloating Mummy Barney noted that Kim's free hand stayed busy forking in or spooning up the welcome-home feast. Happiness had swept away good resolutions. Even better, Betty Barney noted Gordon noting his loved one's appetite.

Kim excused herself after finishing a sizeable portion of rich cream trifle. She wanted to change into her best before going to the Sun in Splendor, where Gordon's pals were eager to catch up on his adventures. Mrs. Barney jerked her chin at Tom Barney and he obeyed the mute order—but stayed outside the room to listen.

"How do you think she's looking, Gordon? Have I looked after her well or have I not? Your Kimberly is blooming."

"Mum, you're an angel. I was worried when you nagged her into coming here, thought there'd be trouble. But you've treated her as your own, anyone can see that." Fanciful, yet Tom Barney sensed his wife boggling. The lad was full of enthusiasm.

"Y'know, I've loved Kim from the minute we met. Only there used to be . . . I dunno, there was this, like shadow at the back of my mind, just an impression, of something not right. You've made her perfect, Mum! Kim's just like you now, a right good armful, a real woman."

Eavesdropping Tom winced and took an automatic step backwards at the metallic note in his wife's next words. He thought of it as That Voice.

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"Proper woman? She is naught but an empty-headed chit. I shall say it again, you muttonhead: SHE WILL NEVER MAKE A FARMER'S WIFE."

Oh dear, now Gordon was in for it. Nothing altered, the long argument revived, with Tom the grain between their millstones. Gordon could make a mule seem the model of willingness to go along with others. Some traits are genetic.

Tom Barney found that he was wrong. Instead of exploding, Gordon said, "It doesn't matter at present, Mum—being a farmer's wife. I have decided that farming can wait. Dad and you are in your prime, so there's no hurry. Now I have seen a bit of the world I fancy more, at government expense. I have signed on again, twelve-year engagement. They promised me promotion and my pick of foreign postings if I would.

"Don't look like that. I shan't be that old by the time my twelve years is up. Come out with a good pension, take over here. Kim will be ready to settle down then, same as me."

"*What?* You dolt, she won't wait another twelve days for you, let alone twelve years. And I won't have her living off the fat of the land, neither. Madam will be out tomorrow morning."

Gordon, exasperatingly calm, advised his mother not to fly off the handle. Kim wouldn't have to wait out his army service. As Mrs. Sergeant Barney—Mrs. Regimental Sergeant Major Barney before too long, just watch—she'd be entitled to married quarters and roam with him. Kim could hardly wait to see foreign parts.

"Betty was beaten, horse, foot, and artillery. Waterloo wasn't in it," Jim Paraly chortled. "The joke being that she was the one as had brought it about. We'd all had the wrong end of the stick; he fell for Kim in spite of her being slim and dressed to kill, not because of. There, they do say chaps marry girls like their mothers . . . and now Kim *was* like Gordon's.

"Oh yes, if that woman had left well alone—and left Kimberly at Gurnard Wells, all slender and that, ripe for another young fellow to turn her head—"

"Or not been too clever by half, fattening her up like an entry for the Bath & West livestock show, Gordon might have gone off her," Mary struck in. "She beat herself in the end. Cheats never prosper." Mr. and Mrs. Paraly nodded at each other, united in human-nature delight over the schemer's downfall.

Fine for them, less so for me. Belatedly I remembered Mary Paraly's deplorable—in a respectable grandmother—taste for teasing. Forgive a writer's flowery phrases: She had conned me rotten, sold me a pig in a poke. She well knew that a rural saga of true love and poetic justice was no earthly use to me. "You told me this was about a murder," I accused.

Mary widened her eyes and patted my arm. "Have patience, my dear, there is more. Gordon and Kimberly wed at St. Peter's. Some

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of his regiment came and made an arch of rifles. It was the biggest event here in ages. Betty put the best face on it she could, squeezed out a few tears during the service. Hah! Crying with mortification, unless she had a raw onion hid in her hankie.

"Now Sophie Farrow was a good loser, she agreed to be bridesmaid and behaved ever so well. Still intent on making Gordon happy, poor soul, trust her not to spoil the day.

"Kimberly didn't have a penny, no family to foot the bill. Betty and Tom stumped up for everything. Full choir, Rolls Royce to church for the bride, reception in a big marquee on the green, come one, come all. Cost over a thousand pounds, I know for a fact. That was salt in Betty's wounds, she watched the pennies.

"I caught sight of her face when the happy couple were leaving. Bless my soul, there's an old picture of Medusa in the church hall, her with the snakes for hair? Betty Barney was Medusa for a split second, and it came to me she had lost a battle but the war was still on."

"Scorched earth," was Jim's laconic summary. "The thought of 'that empty-headed chit' queening it over *her* farm someday was more than Betty could bear. She started seeing a lot of her cousin, him as was on the County Council planning committee, and next thing we knew the Barneys were selling up. The whole shooting-match—stock, machinery, house, and land. That went to the developers.

"If she couldn't keep the farm, then nobody would have it, least of all Kimberly—for being Kimberly—and Gordon for not knuckling under. That was Betty Barney. Cherry Garth Acres it's called now. Ruddy great Monopoly board with houses in rows wherever you look."

"So it *was* murder, just as I said," Mary sighed. "She killed off a good farm that had been in Tom's family for generations. Purely to come out on top in the end. They went off to Canada; he had people there and maybe they were happy. Vancouver, I believe. Tom sent Father a postcard once, said the fishing was grand and the scenery knocked Wessex into a cocked hat. But they didn't last long, neither of them, passed on years ago."

Jim Paraly turned meditative. "Came out on top? Cut her nose off to spite her face, as the saying goes, but Gordon still came in for their money, nobody else to leave it to. That was the year he got out of the army, so he was well set up. For a single man with only himself to please."

Alerted, I looked a question and he made a dismissive noise. "You and your murders! Kim was right as rain, he'd never have laid a hand on her. Gordon kept in touch with Sophie Farrow, regular letters, is how we know how things turned out.

"Kim took to being an army wife. Bit of a queen bee herself eventually. Gordon was the Regimental Sergeant Major and she bossed the NCOs' womenfolk. The trouble started when they were based in Hong Kong—"

"We are into the nineteen sixties now," Mary interrupted.

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"Bikinis and miniskirts and Kim wanted to be Queen of the May, look her best. She dieted with a vengeance, and exercising was all the go, so she went in for that. They came back here for Sophie Farrow's wedding—she'd found a nice chap, seed salesman, a widower—and I swear Kimberly was thinner than when she first landed Gordon. Stand her sideways and she disappeared."

Jim Paraly rapped his pipe out. "More fool her. Turning herself into the very sort of woman Gordon didn't want. Starvation thin, forever looking in mirrors. And his mother was right about one thing. Kim did get on his nerves with her chat-chat about nothing beyond herself.

"They drifted apart, Sophie Farrow said. Trust her to cover up for him. Gordon came right out with it when he was done with the army—Kim had run off with a chap that owned an aerobics gymnasium, she dumped Gordon as soon as he got posted back to England.

"Betty Barney had hopped the twig by then. Just as well, otherwise she'd have learned that doing that to Cherry Garth was needless destruction. The brainless chit wouldn't ever be taking charge of Betty's kingdom."

Reluctantly I conceded, though only inwardly, that there was something in Mary's half-serious claim to have shared a murder story. (Of course, the pair of them had also unfolded a favourite saga to punish me for tiresome nagging. Serve me right, as Mary would put it.)

Killing of a sort was involved. The farm turned into a housing estate, and Gordon's taken-for-granted future eliminated. An army pension and whatever savings made during Kimberly Stottle Barney's high-maintenance era wouldn't buy him another farm. He might run to a few fowls in the back garden . . .

That thought led to another. "Gordon came back to the village? Surely he wasn't hoping to start up again with Sophie. She's happily married, according to you, and he wasn't the sort to chase somebody else's wife."

Husband and wife exchanged another of those looks. "Don't know where you got 'happily' from," said Jim. "We only said married. Not even that, it turned out. Mr. Seeds Rep was a liar, not a widower. Wife One was alive and well in Plymouth, and when she got on his track and the applecart was tipped over, Sophie slipped down the batting order to bigamous wife Number Three. That was the end of that."

"Patience," Mary Paraly beamed. "If only Betty had shown more of it. Her Gordon and Sophie did get together, just as she wanted. It took a sight longer than she'd expected, is all. Bert Farrow was tapping on by then, ready to retire. He'd kept going in the hope that Sophie would marry a better 'un next try, and then the farm would stay in the family. Up pops Gordon Barney with a tidy bit of capital behind him, made for the job. It all turned out surprisingly well, considering."

"Very well, and not only for them. We still get our dozen fresh eggs, without the walk. Sophie drops them off on her way to pick up their grandchildren from school," said Jim. ●

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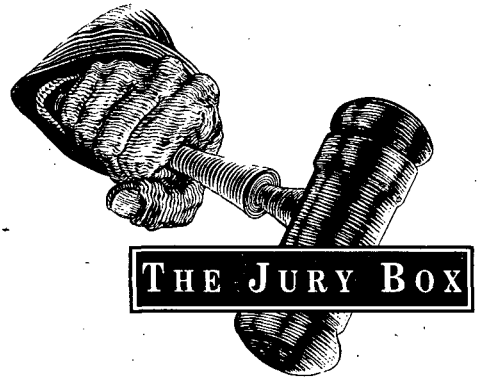

by Jon L. Breen

Our annual Sherlock Holmes round-up begins with a piece of nonfiction that may be the book of the year in mystery scholarship: *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters* (Penguin, $37.95), edited by Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, and Charles Foley. From childhood on, Dr. Watson's agent was a prolific correspondent, and his letters add to our understanding of his remarkable life and character, including such sidelights as the remarkable rigor of a nineteenth-century British education.

**** Donald Thomas: *The Execution of Sherlock Holmes,* Pegasus, $25. With respect for the canon, deep knowledge of Victorian and Edwardian Great Britain, and the writing chops to replicate the Watsonian style, Thomas is the all-time best at Sherlockian pastiche. These five novella-length cases begin with the remarkable title story's account of Holmes's imprisonment by his enemies in the recently deactivated Newgate Prison. Along with excellent detective work, a sense of the cultural, intellectual, and political scene gives the stories added distinction. (Added bonus for these times of linguistic decay: on page 222, Thomas correctly employs the currently abused concept "begging the question.")

*** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Universal Holmes,* introduction by Gary Lovisi, Ramble House, $18 trade paper, $30 hardcover. Baker Street is cross-pollinated with the worlds of Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H.P. Lovecraft, Philip José Farmer, and Jack Kerouac in five stories (some straight, some comic; all previously published but most newly revised) by one of popular fiction's most accomplished literary chameleons. ("God of the Naked Unicorn," with its gathering of superheroes, also appears in Lupoff's *The Compleat Ova Hamlet* [Ramble House, $18 trade paper, $30 hardcover], comprised mostly of science-fiction parodies but including his hilarious deadpan take on '50s paperback private-eye fiction,

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"Death in the Ditch," and "Phannie," a previously unpublished parody of Stephen King's *Carrie* with a background of science-fiction fandom.)

** Gary Lovisi: *The Secret Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* afterword by Richard A. Lupoff, Ramble House, $18 trade paper, $30 hardcover. The first of these three stories is pretty weak, the second much better, the third an Edgar nominee, "The Adventure of the Missing Detective." Lovisi has a tin ear for language but boundless enthusiasm and a way with off-the-wall plots.

*** Nancy Springer: *The Case of the Left-Handed Lady,* Sleuth/Philomel, $12.99. In her second case, Enola Holmes, Suffragist younger sister of Sherlock and Mycroft, evades her non-feminist brothers, does good works as the East End's mysterious mute Sister of the Streets, and fronts a missing-persons agency for a fictitious male sleuth. Real detection and rich 1880s background demonstrate why the author has won two Edgars for young adult mysteries. The vocabulary level is uninsulting to her target audience of nine and up.

** Alex Simmons and Bill McCay: *The Raven League: Buffalo Bill Wanted,* Sleuth/Razorbill, $10.99. With Holmes and Watson vacationing in Scotland, the young Baker Street Irregulars spin-off group are on their own in saving members of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show from suspicion in the scalping of a London policeman. Though designated for the same ages, this wildly plotted action adventure addresses a less sophisticated audience than Springer's.

Historical mysteries, more numerous and varied every year are fertile ground for lovers of old-fashioned clued detective stories. Some recent non-Sherlockian examples follow.

*** Peter Tremayne: *A Prayer for the Damned,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. A much-hated bishop, who supports celibacy of the religious and protests the wedding of lawyer detective Sister Fidelma to her longtime lover/Watson Brother Eadulf, delays the ceremony by being murdered. A detailed background of seventh-century Ireland, including a description of a wild boar hunt, and a cast of characters vividly realized and well differentiated despite their unusual and sometimes similar names highlight a well-constructed, generously-clued whodunit.

*** Michael Jecks: *The Malice of Unnatural Death,* Headline/Trafalgar, $24.95. In 1342 Exeter, Sir Baldwin Furnshill and Bailiff Simon Puttock investigate murders possibly attributable to necromancy, which shares with voodoo the use of pins in wax dolls. As usual, much cross-cutting among a large cast of characters inhabiting an immensely complicated plot demands an attentive reader. Maps, a character list, and an author's note help bring the history to life. **(Continued on page 130)**

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Art by Ron Bucalo

FALSE COLOURS

by Judith Cutler

"Lina, my sweet, he really is such a delectable young man that were you not clearly smitten, I might make eyes at him myself," Griff declared, rapping his almost empty glass of mostly diet tonic but also a little gin on the table in the hopes of more.

"He is beautiful, isn't he?" I ignored the hint.

"The *mot juste,*" he agreed. "Those lovely, luminous dark eyes, the palely interesting skin, that shock of hair that wouldn't have disgraced Byron."

"A bum to die for. And those lovely broad shoulders."

"And, most important, keen to buy one of the most precious items in our shop."

"Not exactly keen. Not now he knows the price," I admitted.

"But he has taste, that's the main thing. He's bought so many other pieces. And he hasn't said he won't buy. After all, when a vase heads towards the four-thousand mark, you can't expect everyone to press a roll of cash into your sticky paw and dash off with it. It's not like buying a mug from IKEA."

It certainly wasn't. The vase in question stood in pride of place in the best-lit and most securely locked display cabinet in our shop.

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Actually, of course, the shop was technically Griff's, but when he'd taken me in, "an orphan," he always said lugubriously, "of life's storm," he'd insisted that what we had was a partnership. Tripp and Townend. (We didn't change the sign over the shop from G. Tripp in case it might encourage our village graffiti artists to cross out the "and" and spray in "to.") Griff, despite his campness and tendency to bend his elbow too often, was the dearest person in my world, and was a far better mentor than my biological parent would ever have been.

Judith Cutler is best known for two series of crime novels set in Birmingham, England, one featuring amateur sleuth Sophie Rivers, the other police inspector Kate Powers. In Oct. '07 something a little different by her was published by Allison & Busby, the historical novel *The Keeper of Secrets*, about a young parson sleuth in 1810 Warwickshire. †

Actually, it was me—I mean, it was I—who'd originally found the vase, a wonderful early-twentieth-century piece with a swirly purple-red glaze called sang de boeuf: bull's blood, in other words. The glaze was dappled with irregular green and black spots. Sounds a mess: in fact, a miracle.

When I'd come across it at a country auction, the vase had been covered with the sort of dust and muck you'd expect to find in a derelict conservatory. But I'd been so sure that I was on to a bargain I hadn't even wiped the base to disclose the maker's imprint lest other bidders catch on. It stood about a foot high and was the sort of shape that said it must simply be looked at for itself: Though at a push it might have held flowers, it didn't want to, and certainly didn't need to. It had come as part of a lot with a couple of rotting rugs, some terracotta flowerpots, and a selection of plastic flowers: a fiver all told.

A tender wash and brush-up had revealed that it was not only Ruskin, but also perfect. Even chipped, it would have fetched in the hundreds, Ruskin is so collectable: Flawless, it was worth at least what we were asking. If we decided to nip along to a top-class antiques fair at a venue like the NEC, we'd be able to notch the price up at least another K.

In its new home, it had drawn Simon to it like a magnet. Most customers pretend not to be interested in what they really want to buy, drifting sideways until coming at it by chance and only reluctantly showing interest. Then, if they know anything about the antiques trade, they ask for your *best,* that is, the lowest price you're prepared to accept, haggling you down from what's on the label.

The price tag was our best.

"It's so lovely," Simon had breathed, as if in a church.

"And perfect." I added firmly, "And it's got the maker's mark." I murmured the price discreetly. I didn't offer to get the vase out of the case.

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It was too precious to drop. Oh, our insurance would have more than covered it, but that wasn't the point. As Griff always said, the world was a paler place when a work of art was damaged or, worse, broken.

"Tell me about it," he invited.

"It's Ruskin. Decorative ware made in the first third of the twentieth century in the West Midlands. The process was top secret, and it died with the maker. So it's rare and lovely."

"Rare?"

"Not many pieces were ever made. A lot of them were destroyed because they didn't meet the factory's high standards. It's said the firm spent over ten thousand pounds experimenting before it went into commercial production—and that was nineteen-hundred's pounds, not today's!"

"Wow!"

"A lot was exported—made for export, actually—and has ended up in American collections. Hugely expensive."

"America, eh?" At last I had his interest. "And it's all this glorious mix of colours?"

I shook my head, pointing to our second-best cabinet. "You see those little cups and saucers, so thin that they're . . . they're . . ." I stopped. "You can almost see through them," I concluded with a rush.

"Translucent," he supplied.

I nodded. "I'm afraid I missed out on most of my schooling." Although Griff had worked hard at improving my memory and my vocabulary, there were still great gaps in my knowledge.

"Any particular reason?"

Why did he look so alert? I gave a "whatever" shrug.

"So you're not a great reader?"

I waved my hands. "I earn my living with these." But thanks to Griff, I now listened to all sorts of audio books while I worked. "Anyway, those turquoise cups: they're Ruskin, too."

"And that blue dish? And are they as expensive?"

"No!" I told him the price, which produced a smile, which might have been relief, though I wasn't sure. "You see, it was much harder to get the sang de boeuf glaze right. So, as I said, if they didn't like something, they destroyed it. Sinful, really—I'd give my hand for something a little faulty!" Actually, my right hand could render something a little faulty almost perfect, I was getting so nifty at restoration, but I didn't need to tell him that.

"Could I look at that yellow thing?"

I didn't like the way he'd said "thing." But perhaps I was being picky. After all, however much I might cherish it, it was to most people no more than an inanimate object. "The ginger jar? Of course." I keyed in the combination and the door swung open smoothly.

"Not just a simple lock and key?" he queried.

I didn't need to answer the question, so I merely smiled as I lifted the lid from the jar, placing it carefully on the green baize

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counter cover. The jar followed. I kept them separate, my hand lightly on the lid. He swung the pot in the air as if it was no more precious than the jar that held his morning marmalade, but inspected it very closely indeed.

"This is the maker's mark? Ruskin, England?"

"That's right."

"What a guy that Ruskin must have been, his weird marriage apart, of course. "

"But—" I was just about to set him right when the shop door pinged, and in came another customer. Mrs. Allen. She might be overbearing to the point of rude, but she spent freely and never bothered to bargain over prices. So Simon would have to wait another day for the real history of Ruskinware, which was actually made by a concern started and run by the Taylor family up in the Black Country.

He wanted the ginger jar immediately, dropping a pile of cash on the counter, and waiting with an impatience he hardly bothered to hide while I wrote out the receipt. He gave his name as Simon Langton, which sounded vaguely familiar, though I couldn't place it.

I felt a real pang as I parted from the jar. Some dealers claim every sale is a simple matter of business, but to me it was saying goodbye to an old friend. I had to like an item enough to buy it, clean it, and, in some cases—but not this particular one—to restore it millimetre by tricky millimetre. Perhaps he sensed something of this. As I let him out of the shop, he took my hand and kissed it, as if he was grateful for a wonderful favour.

Mrs. Allen was less effusive, but spent a lot more on the exquisite Tunbridgeware work box we'd run to earth for her.

"I couldn't resist another piece," Simon declared a week later to an entranced Griff, who was serving in the shop while I prepared lunch: I was watching his cholesterol as closely as his alcohol intake. Griff was a much better cook than I, but we reckoned there was little I could do wrong with a salad. I'd just popped into the shop to summon him, and almost gasped to see Simon again, especially when he showed all those wonderful teeth—he might have starred in an advert for whitening paste—in a smile of recognition. He took my hand and gave another of his extravagant kisses. Over his shoulder, I could see Griff registering my blush and raising a quizzical eyebrow.

At last Simon pointed to a small Ruskin vase. This was a warm pink soufflé ware, and I'd toiled for a cool twenty-four hours to repair an ugly mend. His eyebrows shot up when Griff told him the price.

"So little?"

"It's been restored," Griff explained. We prided ourselves on our honesty in such matters.

"But it looks perfect."

"That's because I have a most wonderful restorer," Griff explained, drawing me to him in a hug.

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"So she's not just beautiful but talented!"

I kicked Griff gently—I didn't want him going off into one of his encomiums about me (see—he works very hard on my vocabulary).

"Tell me, do you ever do private restoration? For a fee?"

"I've done some occasional work for—" I stopped short. That was my clients' business, not mine. "But there's plenty for me to do here."

"And yet you always tell people that the piece isn't perfect?"

"Of course. See, I had to remodel the hand of that little shepherdess."

"But if I wanted to buy her—and she's almost as pretty as her restorer—you'd tell me before I bought?"

"And put it on the receipt." A couple of clients had tried it on with their insurance companies: I wanted no part of any scam.

"So if I buy this little pot, you'll write it down?"

Griff nodded. "And it'll go into our inventory, too. We've based our business, our reputation, on absolute honesty."

"Suits me," Simon said, so casually you could tell that for some reason it didn't. He produced a pile of fivers.

I gave our automatic discount for cash, which he didn't seem even to register, and though he kissed my hand again, he left the shop as if he had a train to catch.

"Boston," Griff said emphatically. "That sort of clipped Amer-English."

"Boston as in Loyd Grossman?" I objected.

"Well, somewhere in New England," he insisted. "I wonder what he's doing over here."

"Living here," I said. "As English as you or I. In fact, he said he was going back to his family in the Midlands."

Simon had come into the shop three or four more times. On each occasion he'd bought Ruskin—restored or damaged, never perfect, and always lustreware. He'd avoided soufflé ware, even though I had found a lovely goblet with a hand-painted pattern of vine leaves I was happy to offer him considerable discount on as a regular customer. He'd even asked me out for a drink once, producing bottles of Beck's. I wasn't too keen, but sipped anyway, just to encourage him to—well, say whatever he wanted to say.

"I met a great fan of yours the other day," he said.

"Did you?" I wasn't aware I had any fans except Griff and my disreputable father, but wasn't about to let on.

"Seamus Byrne. " He pronounced it "See-muss."

Having endured years of Griff's corrections—always kindly done and in private—I didn't say anything. Seamus was indeed an old mate of Griff's, but on the seamier side of the business, and never far from the breadline.

"How is he?" I prompted.

"Very well. Just bought himself a new car."

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"Seamus! A car!" The Beck's went down the wrong way.

"Used," he conceded. "Seems there's been a turn-up in his business."

There'd have to be more than a turn-up for Seamus to afford anything more than a battered push-bike. "How did he manage that?"

"You know Seamus—this and that." He'd changed his pronunciation to mine. But he wasn't going to give any more information without my working hard to get it. And why work hard when Griff could get the low-down for free via the jungle drums?

He brought the subject round to my restoration work, and I told him all about the informal apprenticeship I'd had with some of Griff's mates and the college course I was hoping to get in to. I knew it was rude to rabbit on, and Griff's policy was never to say more than you had to about anything, so I shut up abruptly and asked him about himself.

"I write," he said vaguely. "Freelance. Magazines, that sort of thing."

"It must be wonderful, seeing your name in print," I said. "What do you write about?"

He shrugged. "Anything I can interest an editor in. You never know, I might get asked to write about restoring china."

So that was why he'd asked me out. To use me. To think I'd given him some complimentary tickets admitting him to the next antiques fair Griff and I had a stall at!

Not that he did go to Ardingly, as far as I could see. But I spotted him at Detling. He did no more than flap a distant hand, as if embarrassed to come closer. Could he be hoping to sell at a profit items he'd bought from us? No, he wasn't carrying a bag.

"What is his problem?" I demanded.

Griff peered, ready to switch on his most come-hither smile. You couldn't see Simon for dust.

"His behaviour is, I concede, discourteous," he said at last.

"To the point of weird," I insisted.

Leaving Griff to hold the fort, I tailed him. I didn't think it'd be hard, since I had a good idea where he might be heading, having done the rounds myself before the show opened to punters. Three or four other dealers had had Ruskin on display, the sort of mid-price lustre he bought from us. Some items were damaged, and in colours difficult to like, let alone restore: Who'd want a black vase, for goodness' sake? Some were so pug-ugly Griff wouldn't have given them shoproom—yes, William Howson Taylor might have been a master potter capable of winning prizes wherever he went but he was also a child of his time, with strange ideas about shapes, like a lot of the Art Deco people.

To my surprise, Seamus had rented himself an inside stall. On a big agricultural showground like this, there were two options: pay handsomely for a spot in what is effectively a giant barn, or choose the cheaper but colder and wetter option of an outdoor slot. Seamus had always been an outsider before. Now he was in quite a prime position. As usual, he had a good collection of what he insisted was

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an Irish Art potter, Padraic O'Shaughnessy. We all suspected, given the state of Seamus's hands, that Seamus and Padraic were one and the same. There was also some general tat—sorry, collectibles. Seamus had put on weight, and remembered to shave. Simon was right: He really was looking good. Well, better. Like a pot that's been adequately but not perfectly restored after years of misuse.

"How's tricks, Seamus?" I asked.

"Fine. But if you'll excuse me, I have a customer."

So he did. But only that sort of vague passerby who picks things up and puts them back again, as idly as if they were just scratching an itch.

I'd completely lost Simon by now, but kept drifting along, eyes always open, until something told me to stop. Yes! A Ruskin ginger jar. Sang de boeuf. Very nice indeed, with the maker's mark clearly stamped underneath. There was something familiar about it, but I was sure I'd never seen it before. I might not be much good with words, you see, but I made up for it, Griff said, like a blind man with acute hearing, by my visual faculties. He didn't just mean I could see better, but that I could remember shapes and textures and colours.

"Ruskin may not have had a huge production," Griff said, when I reported back, "but I doubt if even you could know all of it, dear heart. You didn't buy it?"

I shook my head. "At that price? But it's funny I didn't spot it earlier," I said.

"It is indeed—you don't miss much," he said, patting my cheek.

The same thing happened at the next fair we went to, Westpoint, in Devon. It's such a tedious journey from Kent we don't often bother, but Griff decided he fancied a break by the sea, especially when the fuel to get there was tax deductible and he could stay free in Dawlish, a village nearby, with an old drinking crony he'd once trodden the boards with and who now dealt in treen. What he didn't bargain for was Caleb having signed up with AA.

"And now he rabbits on and on about the evils of the demon drink," Griff moaned pettishly.

"Get him on to trade gossip," I suggested.

"But without the booze to lubricate his tonsils, even that's going to be hard work."

"Not with Caleb, it won't," I said bracingly, and toddled off to feed the ducks on the stream running through the middle of the village. What I didn't expect to see was a lovely specimen of flambé ware, right in the middle of the window of the local junk shop.

The colours were so fresh and clear they might just have emerged from the kiln. It was no good, tomorrow Griff must deal with the stall himself: I would have to be there the moment the shop opened.

"It can't be your repair," Griff insisted, back at Westpoint. "Can't be.

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You'd remember if you'd restored flambé ware."

"I remember repairing a yellow vase identical to it. That's why I didn't buy it. Go on, take a look at it. You can take the van—you're sober enough to drive and there's a big car park just off the main road. I'll mind the stall." And keep my eyes open very wide. Not to mention my ears. If there were any news about an influx of mid-to-high-price Ruskin I wanted to hear it. Sometimes a keen amateur collector would need to raise some cash, or one would leave a collection to some relative who didn't know the value and had let some unscrupulous dealer have a job lot. The only rumours I picked up concerned a little glut. Good stuff, mostly just below list price. I should keep my eye open for some, was the general advice.

"Well, did you buy that piece?" I demanded, as Griff returned, carrying packets of sandwiches and two self-conscious-looking bottles of mineral water.

He patted my cheek. "I wish I could say you've inherited it from me, by a line direct. But you've got some divvy in you from somewhere. I don't know what's wrong with the Dawlish vase either, dear heart: I know it's a wrong 'un, that's all. You were right to leave it where it was. And," he added, producing half a bottle of Champagne from his back pocket, "I was right to buy this." Then he placed a six-inch high wooden box in my hand. "A tenner. And it's Kate M. Eadie or I'm very much mistaken."

I scrutinised it, too. "Yes, you're right. However did I miss that?"

"Because you were too busy looking for something else, my love. My bunion tells me that we'll get nearer five hundred than four for this—and in any case, shampoo isn't really alcoholic, is it?"

Back at our shop, we watched the spring bulbs flourish in the Kent sunshine and die in a vicious northeasterly wind. And, just as the weather turned mild and wet, who should return to the shop, kissing my hand with what Griff said was aplomb, but Simon. This time he came with a lawyer's document case, one of those big rectangular jobs. He placed it carefully on our counter.

"I'm in a bit of a spot," he said, shamefaced. "The thing is, I had a chance of buying quite a bit of Ruskin when I was back home in the Midlands."

"How wonderful!"

"But I find myself a little short of cash. I was wondering—could you buy it from me? Or sell it on, at a percentage of the sale?"

If someone had rung the fire bell in my ear, I couldn't have felt more alarm. "I'm afraid buying is Griff's area," I stuttered.

"But he values your judgement? If he likes it, I could leave it here and come back in a couple of days' time?"

I swallowed. "That's an offer I can't refuse," I smiled. "Maybe I could just take a peep?"

He'd been thorough with his packing, there was no doubt about

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that. Each piece was small, nothing like our treasure, still in its showcase, but perfect. There was no trace of twitches in my nose or aches in Griff's bunion by the time Simon returned, and we agreed to sell them on for him. We did the same the following week, so successfully that Griff invited him into our cottage.

"We must celebrate our mutually profitable partnership," he insisted, opening a full-size bottle of Champagne.

Simon looked around him open-eyed and open-mouthed. "This is an Aladdin's cave!"

"All damaged or restored or with personal associations," Griff said quickly. And mostly truthfully. "Family, you know. Do you see much of yours?" When Simon hesitated, Griff continued, "Are they collectors, too?"

Simon downed the contents of his glass, far too quickly to appreciate the nineteenth-century flute. "Sure. Seems this aunt of mine has got friendly with some of the people working at the Ruskin family firm. Their descendants, I should say. So I'm hoping to get hold of some more specimens."

Griff said, "Anything with a personal association will edge up prices even further. So much so, if you have anything from the maker's family, I'd strongly advise you not to bring it to us, but go direct to a top auction house."

But Simon insisted that he'd become hooked on Ruskin the moment he'd looked at the vase in our shop, so it was only right and proper he continue with our deal. The moment he'd locked the door behind him, setting the state-of-the-art alarms, Griff turned to me. "Well?"

"Why did he say 'vayce' instead of 'varse?'"

"Because, my love, he is no more a Brummie than you or I. I told you, he's from the U.S. And it's taken half a bottle of Piper Heidseick for me to get evidence. Now, what's his game, I wonder?"

"Something he doesn't know all that much about, if he thinks that John Ruskin was even alive when the Taylors started their factory," I said.

"Now, take that grim expression from your face, sweetest, lest you end up with wrinkles. You may be able to restore priceless china invisibly, but I've never met anyone who's had half as good a job done on her wrinkles and frown lines."

"So what happens next?"

"He's softened us up with perfectly good items. My bunion tells me the next consignment will have something wrong with it. If only I knew what." He sighed, suddenly looking every one of his seventy-three years.

"It'll be something to do with Seamus Byrne," I said. "Won't it?"

"Not that horrid, smelly little man and his loathsome pseudo-Irish trash!"

"If he's Irish and he produces it, it must be genuinely Irish, surely?"

"That's a good point. They're Seamus Byrnes, though, not Padraic

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O'Shaughnessys."

"But if you can have . . . a name de . . . a whatsit de . . ." I nearly hit myself in frustration.

"A *nom de plume*, dear one. A name under which one writes. Well, I suppose you could have a *nom de* pot, as it were!" He hugged me, laughing. But then his face became serious. "However genuinely Irish they might be, I don't see a huge market swing in favour of his horrid artefacts. So where does his money come from? For money there undoubtedly is."

"He's a mate of yours: Why don't you call on him?"

"Why indeed? But I don't like to cross-question a colleague, Lina: None of us likes nosiness."

"But everyone likes a good gossip. Come on: Get on the phone to Caleb. He should be back from his AA meeting by now."

Griff poked at his unsalted, unsweetened muesli, the jug of skimmed milk in his reluctant hand. "There's a woman passing off fake Susie Cooper to gullible Americans, but the U.S. is having its own back, it seems."

I dug into my muesli, which I forced down purely to keep him company. "In the form of—?"

"A young man who's up to something, but Caleb's not sure what. A brilliant chemist, he says."

"You mean, like Boots?" I asked.

"No. Your white-lab-coat-and-test-tubes end of the market. He went to work in the pharmaceutical industry, but he tried peddling some clever new pills to a rival company and got blacklisted. So he had to find other ways of making an honest dollar. Or dishonest. Over in the U.S., he was faking Washington memorabilia, but it seems he wouldn't have a problem passing off chopped-down cherry trees."

I frowned, then remembered. "So he's okay with lying?"

"Quite. Now, Caleb thinks he's over here. But no one knows what he's up to."

"We know a charming American, don't we?" I said, clutching Griff's hand just in case he'd been a teeny bit smitten despite himself. "With the same name," I added bitterly, "as a former Archbishop of Canterbury!"

"We also know a newly rich potter," Griff said, squeezing my hand, in case I had been too.

"All we need to know is if this potter of ours has bought a new kiln recently, one capable of really high temperatures," I said. "If he has, we may have evidence to lay before the police. Even if we're not sure what of, yet."

"Of what, my love. Of what."

This time Simon brought a truly lovely piece, almost as fine in shape as our treasure, soon to be displayed in a big Black Country

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exhibition in a museum which was also interested in buying it for its permanent collection. We wouldn't make the mint we'd hoped for, but Griff was always keen on doing what he termed a little *pro bono* work. So I was really very keen to handle the new vase, which was dumpier than ours. The colour was excellent, a very deep cream base colour just peeping through the sweeps of purple and crimson, which the black and turquoise markings dappled irregularly.

Simon was taken aback—not surprising, I suppose, considering I'd never let him get his mitts on our vase. While he thought about it, I asked, casually, "And do you have any provenance for it?"

He gaped. Words like that didn't easily come to my mouth, but this was one Griff had assured me was vital to our profession. He'd told Simon that having background information added pounds if it was genuine; he hadn't added it prevented people like us unknowingly handling stolen property.

"Another family item. Grandson of one of the potters—Samuel Butler. I'm sure you've heard of him."

I had. But not as a potter. There were Boswells in the Ruskin Pottery, but no Butlers. In any case, Samuel would have been a bit busy, wouldn't he, trying to work in Smethwick and write books set in Erewhon, which even I could work out was nowhere? Maybe he was talking to that dratted archbishop at the same time! How dared Simon think he could con me so easily!

My hands were still outstretched. Clearly reluctant, he handed the vase over. It was not only stamped with the factory die, but even signed: W. Howson Taylor. A gem. Possibly.

Griff and I had a nice tame policeman called Dan Freeman. He invited himself round for supper from time to time and there was no reason for him not to sing for it. He'd worked undercover on a case involving stolen books—not paperbacks from Ottakar's, something altogether grander and part of our national heritage—and we'd learned to like and respect each other.

"How's the fraud trade, Dan?" Griff asked expansively over something wonderful he'd conjured from guinea fowl.

"Why?" Dan's fork hung between plate and lips.

Together we told our tale.

"You see, it's possible to reglaze pottery," I explained. "And once I was sure I recognised a piece of my handiwork in a different colour from the one it had been when I'd stuck it together, I could look for other pieces. And found far too many on the market."

Griff nodded. "Usually good pieces are like hen's teeth, Dan: The jungle drums beat feverishly when a sale comes up."

"But why involve you?"

"To add an air of respectability to an otherwise fallacious narrative." Griff had the air of someone quoting something, but I'd no idea what. I don't think Dan placed it either, but he smiled warmly.

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Though possibly at me.

"In other words, I think he came in the first instance as a genuine customer. Perhaps he'll be kind enough to tell you that. And I think he was genuinely attracted to a very lovely thing. But then he saw ways of changing already precious items and making them apparently far more valuable—though in fact, he's rendered the poor things worthless." And Griff loathed like poison anyone who ruined a work of art.

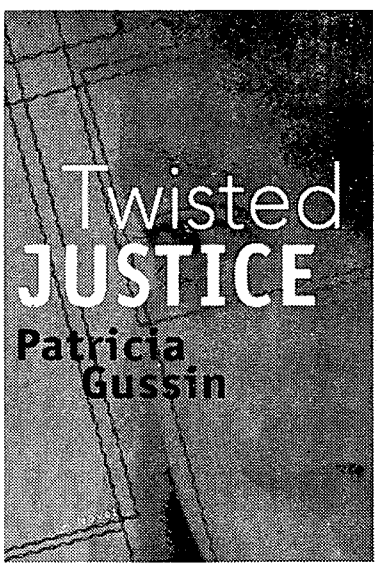
"He tried selling his newly glazed items, which of course carried the maker's mark and in one case his signature. They did well. But perhaps he got more ambitious and knew that with larger and more expensive pieces people would look even more closely. He asked us to sell on some genuine vases and pots: We're sure they were kosher. I think he was lulling us into a state of false security. Then came the first five-thousand-pound vase. If we sold it, no one would imagine it could be a fake."

"He was very . . . pl . . . p . . ."

"Plausible," Dan finished for me kindly. "I know it's a case of 'buyer beware'—"

"*Caveat emptor,*" I said firmly.

"But actually going out of your way to fake things and involve innocent people—" he looked at Griff quizzically—"is definitely illegal. So we can nail him. And bung him back to the U.S." He toasted us both in some of Griff's finest brandy. "What a good job he picked on you: Tripp and Townend would never trade under false colours." ●



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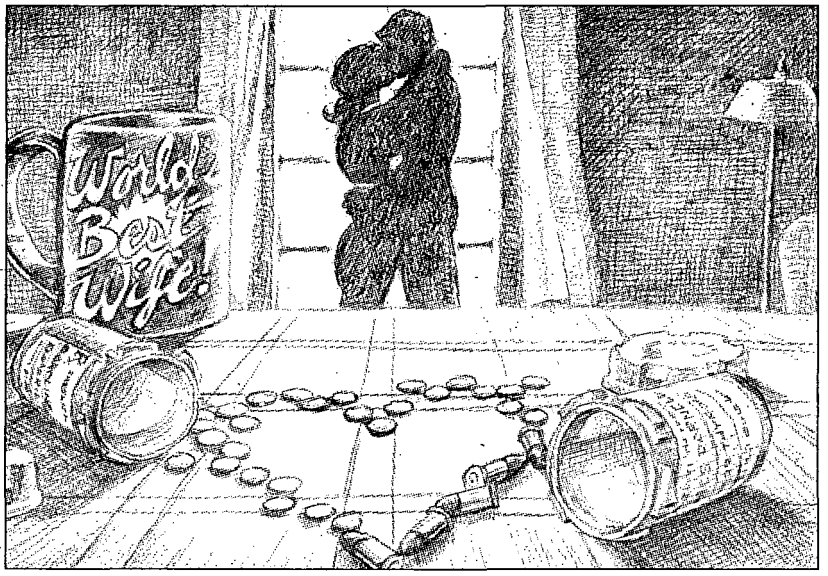

Art by Jason Eckhardt

A MATTER OF JUSTICE

by Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg

Computer-typed letter dated March 11, 2008, and signed by James B. Darnell:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I killed a man tonight.

It was a willful and premeditated act. I waited outside his house in the Fairview section of the city, hidden behind a hedge, and when he came home late, as was his custom, I stepped out and pressed the barrel of my .22 caliber revolver against his temple. I told him why he was about to die and then I shot him. No one saw me. The police have no reason to suspect me. Perhaps they think it was a domestic crime, or a botched robbery attempt, or a random act of violence—in any case, a cold-blooded murder. But it was no such thing.

It was a matter of justice.

Please don't misunderstand me. I did not commit this act rashly, nor do I make these statements lightly. I am not a murderer, even though I have taken a human life. On the contrary, I am a man with a highly developed moral sense, a man who has lived righteously for all of my thirty-seven years. Until last night I had never knowingly broken the law, nor raised a hand against another person. I believe in the basic sanctity of life. Why, then, did I kill this man?

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I did it because he deserved to die.

I did it because if I hadn't, he would have gone unpunished for an unconscionable—a capital—offense.

I did it because he killed my wife.

A willful and premeditated act, yes, but in the same sense that a state-sanctioned execution is a willful and premeditated act. I was his executioner, no more than that. For I also believe in the biblical precept of an eye for an eye. A capital offense must be paid for by capital punishment.

A writer whose first published work was in the science fiction/fantasy field, Barry Malzberg became one of that genre's most notable authors, winning a Locus Award and a Hugo nomination, editing *Amazing Stories*, and creating a style so distinctive that other writers were influenced by and even parodied it. Here he rejoins one of his former collaborators, Bill Pronzini, author of the Nameless series and a frequent *EQMM* contributor. †

His name was Marvin Peterson. An innocuous name for a seemingly innocuous individual. He was a pharmacist, an honorable profession for a dishonorable man, employed by one of the large chain drugstores. I knew him slightly from the not infrequent visits Caroline and I made to Consolidated Drugs, where he was employed—just well enough so that the three of us were on a first-name basis. Caroline suffered from heart trouble and hypertension and I have a thyroid condition, both of which required prescribed medication renewable on a monthly basis. We also did other shopping at the drugstore. On the average, one or both of us had occasion to go there perhaps once a week.

This frequency increased as Caroline's heart condition gradually worsened. She had always been somewhat frail and prone to physical ailments, which she bore without undue complaint—she was a good wife, if a little too placid, dramatic, and intellectually weak. She'd had a serious arrhythmia for many years and it had led to congestive heart failure, which, her doctor told her, needed to be carefully controlled with medication. In conjunction with other meds, he prescribed enalapril for treatment of her high blood pressure, in 5mg tablets to be taken twice daily—though she preferred to take them both at once with her morning coffee, as she did with most of her medications. Naturally she had the prescription filled at Consolidated Drugs. By Marvin Peterson. He attended to it with evident care, as he had all of our prior prescriptions, until the fourth refill, one week ago.

On that occasion he was not careful, he was criminally, unpardonably negligent. Instead of enalapril, he somehow managed to substitute Armour Thyroid, the drug I take in a 60mg daily dosage to replace my thyroid hormone. Enalapril and Armour Thyroid are

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both round and similar in size, though of very subtly different shades of white. Caroline hadn't noticed the difference; she paid too little attention to any of her medications when she took them. She trusted Peterson to have provided her with the proper ones.

A large dosage of Armour Thyroid can be lethal to a person with a serious arrhythmia and congestive heart failure, particularly when taken with a stimulant such as coffee. The combination jolted Caroline's heart, increasing its beat to the point where she suffered cardiac arrest and died almost immediately. The date of her death was six days shy of her forty-fifth birthday.

Marvin Peterson killed her. He killed her as surely as if he had done what I did to him, pressed the barrel of a handgun against her temple and pulled the trigger. He killed her with his gross criminal negligence, and a cheerful smile, as he slid the fatal prescription across the counter and said to her, in my hearing, "Here you are, Mrs. Darnell. A pleasure to serve you, as always."

There can be no doubt that he was guilty. He always filled our prescriptions "as a personal service," and he was the only pharmacist working at Consolidated Drugs that day. No one had access to the prescription in our home; no one but Caroline touched the vial after it passed from Peterson's hands to hers.

Caroline's doctor did not discover the Armour Thyroid substitute. There was no compelling reason for him to check her medication, nor did I permit an autopsy; he assumed the cause of death was a sudden heart attack. I was the one who discovered the truth, purely by accident, as I was about to dispose of the vial. It slipped from my hand, the loose top came off, the tablets spilled on the floor, and when I retrieved them I realized that they were Armour Thyroid, not enalapril as marked on the label. She could not have gotten the vials mixed up. The only person who could have been responsible was Marvin Peterson.

I could have informed the police, but to what end? In the eyes of the law, Peterson had made a monstrous but not a felonious mistake. It might have cost him his pharmacist's license, but nothing more. Even if criminal charges could have been brought against him, the worst punishment he would have faced was a short prison term; there is no capital punishment in this state. A wrongful death suit? I do not care about money, or civil satisfaction—I cared only about Caroline, I cared only about justice.

Once Peterson had been judged guilty by the evidence, my only recourse was to mete out his punishment myself.

I do not expect the police to question me, unless they decide to question every one of Peterson's customers. I am a model citizen, a respected tax accountant, and there is nothing to connect the two of us except for Caroline's and my regular patronage of Consolidated Drugs. The vial of mislabeled Armour Thyroid tablets no longer exists; I destroyed it completely after deciding that

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Peterson must be executed.

I do not believe that I should be punished in any way for what I've done. I have not, despite the letter of the law, committed a crime. If I believed otherwise, I would take appropriate steps; as I've stated, I live by a strict moral and ethical code. But my conscience is clear. Should an executioner be made to suffer for pulling a switch or making a lethal injection? No, of course not.

This document, therefore, is not intended as a confession but an explanatory statement of fact. I will place it in my safe-deposit box, among my other papers, to be read by interested parties long after my own death. I abhor loose ends, unexplained happenings. The world should know, even if it no longer cares by the time the truth be known, of Peterson's offense and the price he paid for it.

Handwritten letter dated March 2, 2008, five days before Caroline Darnell's death, and signed by her:

Dear James,

This is a very difficult letter to write. I've tried very hard *not* to write it, but there is an overwhelming need in me to confess. You have the right to know the truth.

For the past six months I have been having an affair. You don't know the man and his name isn't important. At first, I loved him madly. He was charming, attentive, passionate—all the things I've always ached for you to be. But then I learned the truth about him. He was only using me for his own amusement and satisfaction. He doesn't really care anything about me. Or about anyone, including his wife. Your ways may sometimes be cold and rigid, James, but I know that you do care about me and always have.

I've been such a fool. I feel terribly guilty, and with the guilt has come a deeper depression than ever before. I've tried to fight it with increased amounts of antidepressants, but the drugs no longer work. The guilt and the depression have become unbearable.

I must put an end to my misery. Soon.

I don't know yet how I'll do it. Pills, probably, perhaps something to counteract my heart medicines.

My first thought, once I made my decision, was not to reveal the truth to you or to anyone else. It would be a mercy to you, I know, if I kept quiet and let you believe my death was either accidental or of natural causes. But the desire to confess is too strong and I'm too weak and cowardly to resist. I won't add to your burden by putting this letter where you'll find it immediately after I'm gone. Instead I'll place it among the papers in my desk. You're such a meticulous man, James—I'm sure you'll find it eventually.

I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.

Barely legible handwritten note, undated, signed by James B.

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Darnell:

Marvin Peterson was innocent! I murdered . . . not executed, murdered . . . an innocent man!

How can I live with the terrible mistake I've made? I can't. My conscience, my moral code . . . no. I am guilty and the guilty *must* be punished. Prison is not an option, I couldn't stand to be locked up. The punishment must fit the crime. There is no other choice.

The executioner must now execute himself.

Handwritten letter, dated March 5, 2008, two days before Caroline Darnell's death, and signed by her:

Darling—

I don't know why I should still call you "darling" after the way you've treated me. Habit, I suppose. A small, a very small part of me still cares for you. But you've destroyed all the deep love I felt with your cruel and vicious words. You may be an expert lover, and you certainly know how to *pretend* to care for a woman, but underneath you're selfish and cold. James is a saint compared to you.

I've been so depressed since you told me you didn't want me in your life anymore that I actually planned to do away with myself. I even wrote a letter to James telling him I was going to. But I've changed my mind. I can't let you drive me to self-destruction, or get away with what you've done to me. I'm going to make you suffer as I've suffered these past few days. You've used me, now you'll pay for it.

In the next day or two or three, or maybe a week from now, I'll call your wife and tell her about us. Every sordid detail. And all the terrible things you said about her and about me. I'll call your friends and business associates and tell them too.

Don't think this is an idle threat because it isn't. And don't try to make amends, it's too late for that. You can't talk me out of it. All you can do is wait for it to happen and then suffer the consequences.

From the report of Police Inspector Evan Norris, Homicide Division:

The four documents in this file, together with the other evidence we've gathered, clearly outline the odd series of circumstances linking the deaths of Caroline Darnell, Marvin Peterson, and James B. Darnell.

It amounts to this: The husband committed murder because at the time he believed the pharmacist had made a fatal error which caused his wife's death. He then discovered the wife's letter to him, in which she admitted to her affair and stated that she planned to take her own life. This convinced him that he'd murdered an innocent man, and his guilt and strict moral code

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prompted him to shoot himself with the same gun. Unknown to him, however, his wife had changed her mind and written an angry and threatening letter to her lover. The lover's reaction was to do away with her to protect himself.

The final irony here is that the lover, the man who substituted the Armour Thyroid for Caroline Darnell's heart medication, was the pharmacist, Marvin Peterson. He neglected to destroy her last letter to him; we found it in the trash at Consolidated Drugs, where we also learned that two dozen 60mg tablets of Armour Thyroid were missing and could not be accounted for. James Darnell had been right after all: The man he executed *was* guilty, not of gross negligence but of premeditated homicide.

A tragedy of errors, the whole business.

But if you want to look at it another way, what happened to Peterson and Darnell, if not to Mrs. Darnell, was fitting and proper punishment for their crimes. In Darnell's own words:

It was a matter of justice. ●

by Bill Crider

There are, of course, a lot more things available on the Internet than blogs. Message boards, for example. One of the newest crime-related boards is *The Big Adios*. Here's what it's all about: "a place to discuss the crime/mystery/thriller genres with our very special host: crime author Tom Piccirilli. Visit a while and talk about crime books, movies and all things murderous. Moderators: Russ Dickerson and David T. Wilbanks." You can join an existing discussion of a favorite author, book, or blog, or you can start your own discussion. Quite a few writers are participating, along with readers and fans. The URL is long and complicated (**http://p219.ezboard.com/The-Big-Adios/fmessageboardofthedamnedrm29**), so either do a Google search for Big Adios or type carefully.

J. D. (Dusty) Rhoades's latest Jack Keller novel is *Safe and Sound*, and his blog is *What Fresh Hell is This?* (**http://jdrhoades.blogspot.com**). In addition to being a novelist, Rhoades is a newspaper columnist, and he always includes his weekly column on his blog, along with his thoughts about current events, books, and anything else that grabs his attention. Rhoades is a man of strong opinions and tilts to the left. Reading his blog is usually a bracing experience.

Dave White's first book, a P.I. novel titled *When One Man Dies,* got a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*, and he blogs about being a rookie novelist, about Rutgers football, about his book signings, and about other things at a blog he calls *Dave White's Writing Block* (**http://jacksondonne.blogspot.com**). **(continued on p. 129)**

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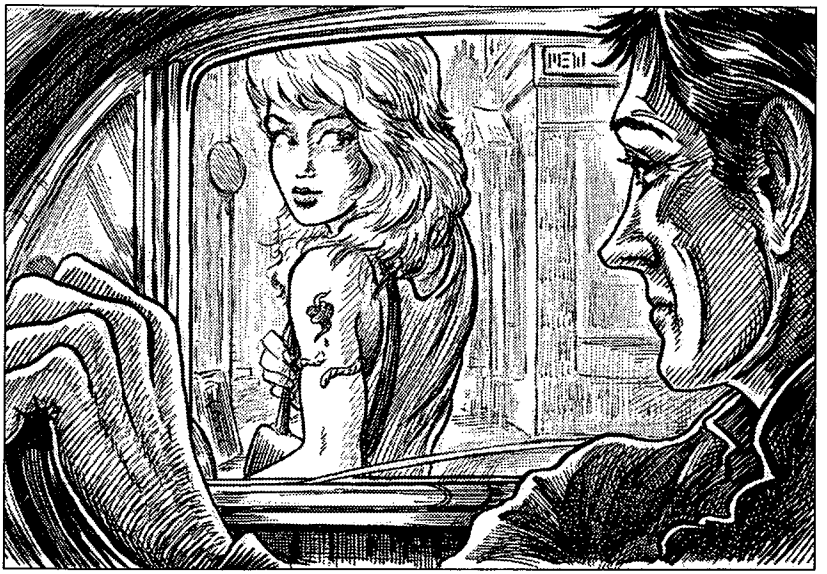

Art by Mark Evan Walker

KILLING BY THE CLOCK

by Barbara Cleverly

The watcher crouched behind rubbish bins overflowing with a fortnight's stinking detritus. The warm weather had come early to Cambridge this year and was causing him some discomfort. He stealthily changed his position, eased his limbs and averted his nose, trying to catch a fresh breeze down the alleyway. At least he had something pleasant to distract and occupy his other senses.

He allowed his gaze to be drawn back to the two girls standing, arms around each other's waists, teetering on the edge of the pavement. Well, why not? Everyone within a hundred yards of them was staring at the couple. Skimpy skirts with low-slung belts glinting with silver discs, boob-tubes, and stiletto heels—the summer uniform of the Cambridge Working Girl. You couldn't get away any longer with calling them "prostitutes." The public felt more comfortable with the delusion created by the use of the innocent-sounding "girls," and "working" suggested reassuringly that they might even be paying income tax.

This pair were shouting cheerful insults and invitations at the drivers of cars braking for the bend where they'd positioned them-

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selves. Unsuccessfully so far. Most had slowed dramatically to look at the girls; some had leaned over and shouted encouragement or lascivious promises. None had suggested serious business. The watcher shook his head in an expression of knowing irony. What else did they expect? On a Saturday afternoon, these blokes had other things on their mind. They were on their way to a football match. And not just any match—the next Cup round was being played at the local ground up the road. Sex would always take second place to football. Breathing took second place to a Cup fixture.

Historical novelist Barbara Cleverly received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* for her sixth Joe Sandilands novel, set in 1926 France (*Tug of War*, Carroll & Graf, June '07). She also began a new series last year with *The Tomb of Zeus* (Delta), also set in the 1920s but starring an amateur archeologist turned detective, in a case involving Theodore Roosevelt. Her new story for us was inspired by some recent murders in Ipswich, where she once lived. ¶

To relieve his boredom, the watcher indulged in a little fantasy. Blonde or redhead, if he had the choice? Any man's first impulse would be towards the blonde. Tall and slender with a cloud of shoulder-length fair hair, she looked like the angel on his grandma's Christmas tree—until she opened her mouth. He shuddered with distaste as the angel let rip with a stream of obscene invective in exchange for a white-van man's provoking comments. Wherever had she learned such language? His granny would have known how to deal with *her!* Coal-tar soap and the cupboard under the stairs! Vicious old trout, his gran. He winced at the memory. But she'd have stood none of this nonsense. He almost looked furtively over his shoulder, fearing still the old lady's challenge. "Gary! Is that *you* skulking by the bins? Come out at once and show me your hands!"

Gran wouldn't have thought much of the redhead either, but she was Gary's choice. Not immediately as attractive, but you'd probably have a more interesting time with this one. Shorter, more rounded, with all the cockiness of a backyard robin. Shantelle, she called herself. That was her street name. Her friend was Christalle. He'd heard them calling to each other when one or the other went off round the corner for a coffee. Enjoying the game. Stupid, really. Who did they think they were kidding? With their unblemished complexions, smooth limbs, and freshly washed hair, no one but a fool would take them for real tarts. The pros on this beat had empty eyes, raddled faces, and strawky hair, and they covered up the needle tracks with long sleeves and jeans. Still—

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their male clients were pretty damn thick and self-deceiving . . . they were easily dazzled and incapable of thinking twice about the genuineness of what was on offer. They'd buy a lottery ticket, bet on a horse, pick up a blonde by the roadside, and always believe it was nothing but their due. Their lucky day.

No surprise there, but the question that niggled him was—why weren't these two chancers being seen off with the usual territorial aggression by the regular girls? Granted, there'd been many fewer working the streets in this part of Cambridge since the murders had started. Most had sought shelter in the safe houses opening up in the quiet residential streets off Eastern Avenue and the ones left pounding the pavements were grouping together in twos and threes for some sort of protection. When one was picked up and driven off, her friend would ostentatiously write down the number in a notebook. The clients objected and there'd been a fracas or two resulting in even less activity on the street.

The regulars were not in evidence today. Warned off? Or stunned by the latest murder—the fourth of what was beginning to look sickeningly like a series. A corpse had been dragged out of a ditch to the south of the city, yesterday. Strangled, like the others.

They were beginning to call him the Clock Killer. Some clever dick brought in from the Metropolitan Police had plotted the dumping grounds, or the "deposition spots" as they called them these days, and come up with the theory that the man responsible was working his way around what would look like a clock face with Cambridge at the centre. The first girl had been killed and left in the Fens to the north at the number twelve on the dial. The second had been found in a country lane at ten past, the third south of Newmarket at twenty past, and this latest, due south on a golf course by the Gog-Magog hills. And all equidistant from the red-light area where they'd been picked up. Ten miles.

The brainiac from the Met had treated the media to a learned explanation of the compulsion that led to a villain choosing his spots with such (literal) clockwork precision. The watcher gave a thin smile. He knew better. These days every Tom, Dick, and Harry watched CSI programmes. Profiling, DNA analysis, trace evaluation . . . there were no more professional secrets. But the police went on assuming their man was an out-of-control noddy. The truth was, he was probably well clued-up about crime-location diagrams, comfort zones, crime-commission intervals, and all the rest of the semi-scientific garbage. The watcher knew exactly what the perpetrator was up to. By sticking to a prearranged pattern, the killer was sidestepping any attempt at analysis and concealing his base. He needn't be the local man they had projected. He could be any London man with a map. It was as simple as that.

The media had caught on to the clock face, of course. The headlines had screamed out the question: *Who will be the 40-minute victim?*

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Is time running out for number 5? The *Cambridge Observer* had printed out a diagram plotting the crime spots radiating out from the red-light zone and, in heavy type, the number 8. It hadn't taken much calculation to work out that west-southwest, ten miles distant and right under the number 8, lay the innocent, sleepy village of Foxfield. Sleepy no longer. The local inn was stuffed to the gunwales with press and police, tripping over each other in their fervid expectation of the next crime.

The watcher's smile widened. Not much chance of an abduction given the level of surveillance. A smart bloke, the killer would no doubt call it a day and turn his attention to another town. Peterborough, perhaps? Lively scene up there, he'd heard. Unless an unmissable opportunity presented itself here. He glanced again at the two girls by the roadside and calculated the risks. Just how vulnerable were they? He noted the CCTV camera above his head. Trained on the girls. A hundred other cameras covered every inch of this street. And, on the tree-lined road parallel to and behind the main avenue there was a mobile police headquarters van parked on a patch of waste ground. Only a complete idiot would fall to the lure offered by these gaudy girls.

Decoy ducks. Police detectives, both. They weren't risking much. Trained in unarmed combat, the pair of them. The watcher was a big, strong lad but he'd have thought twice about tangling with them. And the girls were secure in the knowledge that every shrub, every dumpster, and every corner had a police constable lurking behind it doing nothing but watch them. Overkill. Waste of time.

Every man they could call on had been brought in for the operation. Even auxiliaries like himself—Community Police Officer Gary Newstead—had been taken off regular duties and put to work on the investigation. Still, he wasn't complaining. Watching Shantelle and Christalle larking about—it beat nicking shoplifters in the Arboretum Estate mini-mart. And the overtime was always welcome.

He'd thought they were on to something earlier. Thick traffic in both directions. Surely the top brass could have liaised with someone and found there were events going on all over the city this Saturday? A smart Bentley had cruised by, returning within minutes. A gent had stepped out, actually stepped *out* of the car to address the girls. His booming voice had carried as far as Gary even over the street noise, relaxed and conversational: "I say, ladies! I find myself encumbered by a growing problem. Any chance of some assistance, I wonder? From one of you? Both?" Gary's crouch had moved smoothly into a racing start. He'd noticed that the gent's eyes were sharp and were taking in his surroundings. Cute as an alley-rat, this one. He must have sensed that something was not quite right; the voice, when he spoke

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again, no longer had its confident edge. "Lost my way, I fear. Sat-nav absolutely useless! I'm trying to get to the shindig at the hospital . . . dashed if I can remember its name. . . . They've got a red-ribbon fund-raiser on. Know the one I mean . . . ?"

Shantelle, popping her gum and grinning, had directed him to turn around and head back east and pick up the Newmarket road where he'd find the Cambridge Clinic. And that had been the only excitement.

Newstead pulled up the cuff of his special-issue police camouflage suit and checked his watch. Nearly two hours here and no result. Two more hours to go. He stifled a yawn.

His attention sharpened. Something happening at last?

He relaxed again. The redhead was whispering in the ear of her mate and giggling. He interpreted the body language. She was apologetically nipping off to the van for a quick pee.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do while I'm away, Christalle!" she shouted with annoying archness.

Newstead cringed. His professional sensitivities were affronted. Stupid cows! They were enjoying themselves too much. Centre of attention and fancying themselves in the role. Well, all women were tarts at heart. He'd often heard it said. Why couldn't she cross her legs? Or lay off the coffee? She should have thought! This manoeuvre was unscheduled—could put the whole operation at risk. All this detailed planning and someone forgot that girls need to go to the loo, especially when they're feeling nervous.

He watched Shantelle hurry fifty yards down the road but his head whipped back to the pavement in front of him at the sound of screeching tyres. A black taxi had drawn up right by the other girl, Christalle. Gary Newstead leapt to his feet as the blonde put her head on one side, peered, and moved forward to greet the driver. He could have sworn that she knew him. Gary stayed uncertainly in place. No one else was moving in. Was this some police manoeuvre that hadn't filtered down to bottom-feeders like him?

The driver of the black London cab leaned over, flung the door open, and began to speak to the girl. She was showing surprise but no sign of tension or fear. She leaned in close and talked back to him. This must be prearranged. Plain-clothes inspector calling by to take her pizza order? Just what he'd expect of this Keystone Cops op! The watcher decided he could stand down.

Abruptly, he tensed, hardly able to believe what he was seeing.

The driver was hauling the blonde into the passenger seat. All Gary got was a glimpse of a black-shirted arm, a black watch strap, and a dark head. He heard the click of the doors as the automatic lock was applied. The cab drove off at speed.

No time to juggle with notebooks. Shaking off his astonishment, Gary pulled his pen from his pocket and scribbled down the number of the vehicle on his wrist, then he charged forward to join all the

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other ineffectual lurkers breaking cover, red in the face and stammering excuses for their lapse.

"Did anyone get the number?"

"Where's the bloody pursuit car?"

"Get on to traffic control!"

"Alert the team at Foxfield!"

"Ten miles away. He won't get that far, but check the backstop's in place!"

In the hubbub, Special Constable Gary Newstead finally made his voice heard. "I got it, sir! Sir! I got the number!"

"For your own safety, sir . . ." The blond girl's voice had an edge of steel. "I'd advise you to stop and put me out at once."

"What?" The driver's response was derisive. "Before I've sampled the wares on offer? You're very choosy for a tart, aren't you?" He cast a scathing look sideways. "I'm assuming that's what you are? Decked out in that bum-freezing bit of titillation, with hair gilded and frizzed and starched to a standard any medieval Florentine light-skirt would have envied! Just don't insult me by telling me you were inspecting the drains or collecting for charity! Why the sudden shyness? Could it be that you don't do it with old acquaintances?"

Detective Constable Christina Kenton sighed and tried to assess the determination and aims of the stern-faced man at the wheel of the black cab. The latest in a line of extraordinary vehicles he'd owned. She remembered ten years ago it had been a Thunderbird, followed by an AC Cobra, then an ancient and totally covetable Morgan. Always more than a touch of the showman about Julius Jameson.

She tried again. "It's not what you think. No time to explain, even if I were allowed to. Drop me here. Right here. At once. You've put yourself in danger."

"Ah! You're threatening me with your poxy pimp? Ooh, I shake with terror!"

The wheel of the taxi wobbled dramatically and she bit back a nervous protest.

With creeping alarm, Chris had noticed that he was threading his way skillfully through the city, moving with the typical panache of a taxi, one of the hundreds on the road on a busy Saturday. No one looked twice at a cab shooting down a sidestreet or driving up a buslane. It was what cabs did. They were making excellent speed, but going where? The green square of Parker's Piece came into view and for a hysterical moment she thought he was about to turn her in to Police HQ. She'd never live it down. But the station passed by on the right and all lights changed in their favour as they approached. Over the river and on to the common, dotted with black-and-white cows up to their udders in a froth of

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Queen Anne's lace. There could be no doubt. He was heading southwest, out into the country. She thought she could guess his destination. But could he possibly have remembered—after ten years?

He broke her tense silence as they joined the Barton road. "Do you think, you little twerp, that I knocked myself out for two years getting you and those other bumpkin friends of yours through their A-levels and on to university for you to end up tarting on the street? What's the attraction? Do tell!"

His cynical purr had always set her teeth on edge. The other girls had thought it sexy. They'd sighed when he'd recited Shakespeare to the class—and Mr. Jameson never passed up a chance to use his voice. An actor turned teacher when the roles had dried up, he'd had the looks, the glamour, and the confidence to reduce the class to a jelly. Even some of the boys had quivered. But Chris had never been taken in by the sculpted profile, the ready wit, the throbbing baritone. With Mr. Jameson, all was, she was convinced, illusion. She'd always pictured him as a mysterious box swathed in black velvet. But what was at the heart of the box? Emptiness —or a picture of himself?

"Getting much job satisfaction, are you?" He'd not lost the knack of irritating her to the point of fury.

"Plenty," she couldn't restrain herself from saying lightly. She decided he didn't deserve an explanation. And he'd only laugh even more derisively if she told him she was a detective constable. He'd always affected a disdain for the conventional, the conservative, the mundane. He'd projected a bohemian image, perpetually surprised and disconcerted to find himself in a classroom. No, she'd stay in the character she'd assumed, the better to torment him. "The financial reward is much better than anything you could get from teaching. And, honestly, there's not a lot you can do with a degree in English, is there, sir?" She regretted that the automatic "sir" had slipped out.

"Honestly?" he spoke with emphasis. "No, I suppose not. You chose the dishonest and lazy option, I see. Don't you want to know where I'm taking you?"

She didn't answer, but she was quite certain she knew. She would have to brace herself for an uncomfortable scene when they got there. He wasn't taking her home. He had no way of knowing about the flat she shared in the city—he was heading out to the country to one of the villages ten miles away to the southwest. To her mother's house at Shepton. He was going to dump her on her mother's doorstep again just as he had ten years ago. And deliver another telling-off.

Then it had been a gentle finger-wagging: "Afraid your daughter's had a little too much to drink at the disco, Mrs. Kenton. I'm sure you'll find the right words to say to her . . . when she's sober

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enough to hear them, of course. We wouldn't want this to happen again, would we?"

And *this* time what would he come up with? "Found your daughter selling her body on the streets, Mrs. Kenton. I'm sure you'll find the words to discourage further excursions into immorality."

Chris suppressed a giggle. Her mother was smart. She'd take the situation in at once, feel embarrassed for his mistake, make all the right conversational noises, and the upshot would be the same as last time. When he'd refused her polite offer of a cup of tea and left, she and her mum would stand in the hall, eyeing each other until they heard the sound of his car moving off and they'd fall about laughing.

He enjoyed her silence and then said: "I think you've guessed."

He put his foot on the accelerator, sliding neatly between lorries heading for the motorway, then, at the last moment, he nipped down a sidestreet, turned, and reentered the traffic flow in the opposite direction. "Turn on a sixpence, these cabs," he announced cheerfully. "I shall never drive anything else. You can get them for a song, you know, at the London car auctions. Change of seating arrangements essential, of course." He cast a satisfied glance at the passenger seat with its leather upholstery. "Rather unfriendly to carry people about in the back. And a quick change of license plates and you're anonymous. Never get stopped by the Plod." He cleared his throat. "Change of plan," he added. "I've decided what to do with you."

"Whatever it is, this is kidnapping. You are holding me here against my will and I have given you due warning." She was proud of the firmness of her tone.

Her abductor was less impressed, apparently. "Who's going to listen to the bleatings of a common prostitute? Come off it! Occupational necessity, isn't it? Getting into cars with men? But this is your lucky day. I came along quite by chance and I may even be able to save you from a lifetime of sin. Who knows? Life's too short and too precious to spend it in the gutter." He flashed another cold glance. "On drugs, are you? No? Surprised but pleased to hear that. You're not too far gone. You look as though there might still be time to save you from yourself, as they say."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Remember *Henry IV?*

. . . the time of life is short!
To spend that shortness basely were too long,
If life did ride upon a dial's point,
Still ending at the arrival of an hour.
An if we live, we live to tread on kings;
If die, brave death, when princes die with us!

"Dial? Hour? Death?" The words tolled like a funeral knell in her head and Chris felt a trickle of cold horror creep along her spine.

For the first time since he'd picked her up, it occurred to her to

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wonder what business he could possibly have, driving down Eastern Avenue through the red-light district. Sick in her heart, she realised that this man whom she had always mistrusted was not taking her home to her mother in Shepton as she had naively assumed. He seemed to have other plans for her.

The detective inspector was trying to keep the lid on the pot of bubbling emotions. "That's enough, Shantelle! Er . . . Sarah! Not your fault. When Nature calls and all that . . . Not one hundred percent your fault . . . let's say forty-nine. Fifty-one for Chris. Why the hell didn't she put up a fight or get off a scream? She's always ready enough to have a go at me . . . Something not right here . . . Get me the replays up on screen. We'll take another gander. Where's that cab got to? You're joking! Hell! He's given us the slip? Anyone traced the number? A *London*-registered cab?" He groaned. "A poacher! That's all we need! Now we'll have the Met swarming all over our patch! Track 'im! He's most likely on the M11 by now, heading south."

An exclamation of dismay from the redhead distracted him.

"Oh, for God's sake, Sarah! Look, love, do us all a favour, will you, and stop blubbing! Go home. Take the rest of the shift off. After you've made your statement. Go back to the station . . . you're in no fit state . . . is there a squad car around? Get a lift back, love . . ." He paused and added awkwardly, seeing her shoulders shake: "Try not to worry! She'll be all right. Tough girl, DC Kenton. Go and put some clothes on—that'll make you feel better."

The inspector waved her away. The sympathetic eyes of the rest of the squad followed her as, white-faced and suddenly awkward, Sarah slipped a pink cardigan over her bare shoulders and stumbled out of the office in her sparkling high heels.

"*Now* where are you going? I'm getting fed up with this!"

"You know where. But first, we're going to drive around for a bit. Get to know each other again. I want to hear your story, Chris. Find out what led you into this disgusting mess. Try to understand. You may not have guessed it, but you were always one of my favourite students. Not the cleverest—but the most individual."

"You disguised your esteem pretty well," she said, unbelieving.

"I'm good at disguise," he reminded her.

They drove out into the country, past the fruit farms. They passed a signpost to the left: *Shepton 6 miles Foxfield 6 miles.*

"Your neck of the woods, if I remember rightly?" he commented.

He drove straight on. "I thought we'd go via Grantchester." Suddenly he was speaking with the heavy kindliness of an uncle proposing an outing. "Such a beautiful village. All of England is there, I always think. Now, if one were dying, these are the images one would want to carry with one, wouldn't you agree?"

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"One would agree," she replied, determined to be tiresome.

"I'd want to say goodbye with, imprinted on my mind's eye, meadows full of silvery moon pennies, chestnut trees, swans preening on mysterious dark stretches of river, and . . . and . . . here it comes now! The church! Check the time, Chris—I don't want to take my eyes off the road . . . tricky bend coming up . . . wouldn't be much fun if we both ended up splattered on the churchyard wall, would it? But it wouldn't be bad to be hearing the words of Rupert Brooke as one expired, either . . . What was it he said?

Stands the church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?

Well, go on! Have a look!"

"Of course it stands at ten to three," she snarled, annoyed by his dramatics. "Because it *is* ten to three! You stage-managed that well." She dared to ask: "Do you ever stop acting and just . . . well . . . *live?*"

He gave a laugh he would probably himself have described as "sepulchral," she thought. It boomed out from some cold, empty space.

"And why this obsession with time?"

"I think I've already answered your question. Or, at least, The Bard has spoken for me. That's why he's so often quoted, Christina. Whatever our deepest thoughts, you can be sure that Shakespeare has already voiced them for us, but with ten times the nobility of phrase. If only we had the wit to profit by his wisdom, how many mistakes we would avoid, how much pain would be averted."

Chris groaned. Why, after all these years, did she feel she was being tested? With a strange feeling that her response might be important for her also, she wrestled with memory and expression.

"Okay, your answer: the speaker's the King, I guess because he's using the royal 'we.' He's saying life's short. So we ought to live as good a one as we're able. If we live on, well, that gives us an advantage over any dead king because you can take nothing with you when you go—not even kingly status. And if we die—so what? —it's a brave death when princes are dying along with us."

Jameson gave an elegant shudder. "Something on those lines," he said repressively.

She looked again at the face, as handsome as it had been ten years ago, but subtly changed. The long-lashed dark eyes were shadowed, the mouth indecisive, tormented. Well, it was pretty much as you'd look if you'd decided to kill someone, she supposed.

But her training was taking over. She flexed her hands and feet, ready to call on instant supplies of adrenaline when the moment came for flight or fight. If she could only get out of the car and kick off her silly shoes, she thought she could probably outrun him. And, though he was strongly built, she'd put up a fight if it came to it. This victim wouldn't go down without a murmur.

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There'd be tissue under fingernails, scratches on his face. She decided on a surprise preemptive attack, going for the eyes. He'd never expect it. But there was something she could try first. She was a sort of hostage, wasn't she? Okay—she'd try out the prescribed technique. She might just pull it off. Avoid bloodshed. After all, it was unknown for serial killers to murder someone they already knew. That must work in her favour. Chris adjusted her blouse, pulled down her skirt, settled back in her seat, and looked out of the window.

"You're right, Mr. Jameson—I say—may I call you Julius?—after all these years I feel I've caught up with you in age—it *is* perfection. Glorious countryside! And the best moment of the year! Easy to see why neither of us has moved away. *(Establish a link.)*

"And I may not be looking the part at the moment, but I have actually stayed a scholar of sorts. I played Desdemona in my first year in college . . .You inspired me—you inspired many of us . . . did you know Maisie Jones was madly in love with you, by the way? No? And Jennifer Hogg and Patrick Dewar? We were sure you must have guessed! *(Feed his sense of self-importance.)*

"Now this time when you deliver me to Mum, I want you to accept her cup of tea. Lots to talk about!" *(Convey the idea that the man has a future beyond the present circumstances.)*

Chris added an incentive her instructors had never thought of: "Yesterday was baking day . . . there'll be a lardy cake and some chocolate brownies." *(Greed. What man could ever resist a brownie?)*

Her girlish prattle faded away. His eyes were looking inward, dull and dark as Byron's Pool, and she realised he hadn't taken in a word she'd said. He turned to her. The swift smile he gave her was the sweetest she would ever encounter and was the more striking for its utter sincerity. Finally, he had dropped the mask of irony and she was being given a glimpse of the man below. But the face was frozen by agony, the man adrift and unapproachable.

"I'm glad you're with me at the last, Christina," he said softly. "I'd never have planned for it, but now the moment's come, it feels right. I did always admire you, you know. Enjoyed our fencing bouts. If things had been different . . . Ah, well . . . *brave death when princes die with us.* Princess would have been good. But I'll settle for a tart. Whatever . . . it's nice to have company."

She knew the signpost well. A few yards before the level crossing they were offered: *Shepton 1 mile Foxfield 1 mile.* He took the Foxfield turn, brought the taxi to a halt in the deserted lane facing the level crossing, looked at his watch, and listened.

The three-thirty goods train on the London line screeched its customary warning.

Gary Newstead scooped up the Monday copy of the *Cambridge Observer* from the mat and settled down with his mug of tea at the

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scrubbed table of his gran's old kitchen. He grunted at the size of the headlines on the front page. Plenty of news today, then.

Fifth slaying! they shrieked. *Body of victim found at Eight Bells Public House.*

In a quiet village ten miles southwest of Cambridge, a day after she was reported missing, the latest victim of the Clock Killer has been found. Almost exactly where experts predicted.

A police spokesman tells the Observer that the corpse of a young woman was abandoned (possibly killed) in the orchard to the rear of the Eight Bells pub in Shepton. The modus operandi conforms to that of the four previous victims. There was no sign of sexual assault, and the death was by strangulation.

Police fear that the killer, by the significance of his choice of location (EIGHT Bells), may be taunting the forces of law and order. It had been widely predicted that the next attack would take place at nearby Foxfield, which lies exactly on the eight spot of the dial the police themselves had foreseen. It was late on Saturday night when the landlord became suspicious that something was amiss. The pub's guard dog, released to perform his nightly duties, entered the rear snug, carrying a lady's silver shoe in his mouth. The Alsatian (Butch) led his master and a selection of guests outside to the next grisly find by torchlight: a pink cardigan caught up on a rosebush.

Behind the bush, the grim discovery. A double shock awaited the investigating officers who hurried to the scene. An examination of the body revealed the victim to be one of their own: DC Sarah Sharpe (25), who had, by a strange quirk of fate, herself been working on the case.

DCI Rowe, who has been leading the enquiry, will pay his respects to the deceased in a news conference to be held at noon today. It is confidently expected that he will be announcing the arrest of a suspect.

The landlord, who is helping the police with their enquiries, told our reporter of his puzzlement. His pub, isolated and at the end of a cul-de-sac, had seen no traffic other than regulars and police vehicles coming and going at the weekend . . .

Gary read the article again carefully. He was so absorbed he didn't hear their quiet arrival.

"Enough shock-horror in there to entertain you, Newstead?" The grating voice of the detective inspector. "Did they get it right?" Two heavy hands descended on his shoulders. He listened in silence to the rigmarole: "Gary John Newstead, we are arresting you for the murder of Sarah Sharpe . . ."

"Gerraway with you! You're 'aving a larf!" Newstead started to protest.

They couldn't know! He'd offered her a lift back to the station and no one had even noticed them set off. So many squad cars milling about they hadn't been given a second glance. They'd

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never trace the car. He couldn't even remember which one he'd used himself. She'd come quiet as a lamb, believing every word of the story he'd fed her about instructions to redeploy to Foxfield. Her mind was still on her mate. She was even keen to get there and help out. He'd knocked her unconscious in a lay-by before they approached the village and fastened her arms behind her back. His usual M.O. He risked no scrapings from fingernails, no scratches on his face. Nasty moment when she'd come round in the shrubbery, but he was always a quick, neat worker. He'd left no more trace than with any of the other sluts. And she *was* a slut. No doubt about that. He'd watched her enjoying herself, tormenting the men. Making fools of them. A slut. Like his mother. Gran had had to throw her out in the end. Then Gran had got him out of the Home and brought him up herself. Strictly. Correctly. She'd have approved.

The DI was trying to balance distress at the death of a smart young officer and elation at the result he was about to announce. His voice was tightly controlled and betrayed only a trace of glee as he allowed himself the satisfaction of an explanation.

"Sarah was tough and she was clever. She worked out she was in trouble and left a trace in the police car. We checked out the whole bloody fleet! The one you were seen returning to the pool—the one that still has your fingerprints on the wheel—also had stuck down on the door side of the passenger's seat a wodge of chewing gum. Cram full of Sarah's DNA! She parked it there deliberately, I reckon."

"Only proves I gave her a lift back to the station," Newstead objected. "Am I saying I didn't? If you ask me, I'll tell you! Go on—ask!"

"Agreed. But it was the first link. And once we had you up on screen, so to speak, it turns out it's the second link that's going to do for you . . . Tissue under her nails," the DI watched Newstead's face closely as he said the words. And, seeing with gratification the surprise he'd caused: "Naw, lad! Not her *finger*nails. Tied behind her back with plastic cuffs, her hands were, but our Sarah fought back, didn't she, Gary, old chap? She kicked off her shoes and raked your leg with her *toe*nails. I bet if I could work up the will to do it, I could lift your trouser leg and find a six-inch scar on your right ankle. Probably thought it was a rosebush you'd scratched yourself on in the scuffle? We've done the analysis. Now we'll be needing a sample of your DNA. Open wide, will you? Sergeant—if you please?"

Mrs. Kenton put the kettle on and hurried to answer the doorbell.

Her neighbour, round-eyed, thrust a copy of the local paper at her. "Here you are, Sue. Page three. What a tragedy! Ever so sorry, dear. Better not keep you, in the circumstances." And she hurried off.

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Sue Kenton settled down at the kitchen table with a pot of tea to read the account.

Angel of Death Flies Over Village.

Second mysterious death in twenty-four hours.

Has the Angel of Death flown over Shepton this weekend? This is the question villagers are asking themselves as they grieve for a second local person whose dramatic death is reported.

A young detective constable whose family lives in the village, Christina Kenton (26), witnessed the tragic event. Walking in a quiet country lane near her home, she was surprised, on approaching the Foxfield level crossing, to be overtaken by a black taxicab. "The driver must have seen the lights flashing and the bar come down," states the witness. "Everything mechanical appeared to be working perfectly. The driver hesitated and waited until the goods train drew near and then he charged forward deliberately into its path."

The taxi was swept a quarter of a mile down the track. It's a miracle that no one but the cab driver was killed. The driver of the train was taken to hospital suffering from shock but later released.

The victim was thirty-eight-year-old actor Julius Jameson, who will be remembered for his appearances as a young surgeon in the popular East Anglian series Cottage Hospital. *Coincidentally, Mr. Jameson was, in recent years, actively concerned in real life in hospital affairs. He was one of the moving forces in the red-ribbon AIDS charity and was returning from an event at the Cambridge Clinic hours before the incident. Mr. Jameson made no secret of the fact that he was himself a sufferer from the scourge of HIV. In the circumstances, police are treating the death as premeditated suicide.*

Minutes later, Chris appeared, still in her dressing gown, pale and distressed. She'd shown every sign of bearing up well after the death of her old schoolteacher, but the news on Sunday of Sarah's death had sent her into a shuddering and prolonged silence. She came and sat down by her mother's side to read.

"Jameson wouldn't be pleased. Second billing. His death only makes it onto page three this morning," said Mrs. Kenton with asperity. "You lied to them, Chris. You told *me* you were in the car with this nutter seconds before. Have you told me everything?"

"I told them the simplest thing. What I thought they'd believe. It's taken me awhile to work it out for myself," Chris said. "He was going to kill us both." Her voice was subdued, emotionless. "I couldn't get through to him, Mum. He wasn't even listening. He'd decided I was some worthless whore who'd be better off dead. He was doing me a favour. And using me to ward off the loneliness. He could never function without an audience and I was unlucky enough to drop into the front seat of the stalls to witness his grand finale. His death scene."

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Her mother hugged her and poured out two mugs of tea. "What made him change his mind?"

"I used the only words that would penetrate his delusions." She smiled. "Not *my* words. The Bard, as he called him, came riding to my assistance."

In a pure, awed voice she repeated the lines:

"That death's unnatural that kills for loving.
Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame:
These are portents; but yet I hope, I hope,
They do not point on me."

"Good Lord! That's Desdemona pleading for her life minutes before Othello kills her! And you're saying he heard you? Did he understand? What did he say?"

"He understood, all right! He was never one to miss a cue! He gave me Othello's response: *Down, strumpet!*

"And all I had in reserve was the very next line: *Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!"*

"It didn't work for Desdemona, poor chick."

"The train hooted its half-mile signal. He burst out laughing, unlocked the doors, and pushed me out into the lane. He gave one of those Shakespearean bows, you know, all fluttering hands, gleaming teeth, and tossing curls, and barged through the crossing bars. End. Finis."

"But why the hell . . . ? I don't understand! At least I can see why he'd want to do away with himself . . . but . . . why put *you* through all that?"

"Well, *this* is why, Mum! Here I am, here we are, talking about his final flourish. If he'd had a lonely death, unobserved by anyone, they might have thought he'd made a silly mistake, lost concentration, been blinded by the sun. . . . Idiots drive through level crossings every month, don't they? Who would know that Julius Jameson had died with panache, handsome as the devil, laughing at Death?"

Chris's calm finally broke, her voice stricken and angry: "He's left me forever with that image branded onto my mind. He made sure that there was someone here below who'll never forget his last performance."

But her mother was having none of it.

"Bollocks!" she said. And, surprisingly:

"All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and their entrances.

"Fine, Chris love. The bugger's had his exit, as far as you're concerned! Got that? Offstage . . . through a trap door . . . up in smoke . . . whatever you can picture. And now what you've got to do is look forward to an *entrance*. Prince Charming, for choice. Surely time for *him* to show himself?" ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE LONG NIGHT OF A PENITENT

by Yasmina Khadra

Translated from the French by Peter Schulman.

"When peace reigns, the bellicose man makes war with himself."—Nietzsche

Abou Seif gingerly touches the blade of his knife as he carves a barely noticeable oval incision within the lines of his finger. Slowly, a minuscule drop of blood hatches, grows, drips down his thumb before trickling down to his palm. Abou Seif licks it luxuriously, then, with demoniacal laughter, throws his head back and advances towards the woman tied to a chair.

"I'm going to rip your guts out."

Matching action to speech, he lifts her chin with the tip of his knife and, in one swift move, slits her throat from ear to ear. The pain is so intense that the torture victim is thrown brutally into the air. Her eyes are popping out of their sockets. Abou Seif has to move aside to avoid getting splashed by all the blood. All of a sudden, the wall gives way behind him as he tumbles down an abyss.

"Nooooo!"

"About Seif . . . Abou Seif . . . wake up."

Abou Seif indeed wakes up. He is sitting in the middle of the bed, his throat on fire. His breathing resonates throughout the room as though it were a subterranean rumble. With a feverish hand, he wipes the sweat from his brow and lets himself fall back onto his pil-

A former Algerian army officer living in exile in France, Mohammed Moulessehoul, aka Yasmina Khadra, has had five novels translated and published in the U.S., including *The Sirens of Baghdad* (Nan A. Talese '07), and *The Attack* (Nan A. Talese '06). *Wolf Dreams* (Toby '06) may be of interest to readers of this story, for it too deals with a participant in the Algerian Civil War.

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low. His wife leans over him, takes his hand, and holds him tightly.

"Another one of those damned dreams?"

"Leave me alone."

"Why do you refuse to see a doctor?"

"I'm not a nut job."

"I . . ."

"Shut up, will you!"

Abou Seif's eyes bulge with rage, then, feeling completely wiped out, he hides behind the palms of his hands.

"I'm sorry," his wife says.

"It's not a big deal."

"I'm worried sick about you. You're wasting away; you're not eating and you can't fall asleep for more than a second without waking up and hitting the roof. There's no shame in seeing a doctor. He can prescribe some sort of treatment and, in a few days, you'll feel better."

"Stop talking about doctors, okay?" Abou Sief becomes agitated once again. "I'm not crazy, dammit. Watch what you say . . ."

Filled with rage, he gets out of bed, hastily puts on some underwear, and, as he gets dressed, grumbles: "Do you think I enjoy this shit?!"

He goes towards the bathroom and turns the light on. The harsh brightness makes him squint. The mirror hurls a disturbing face right back at him. Abou Seif notices that he has in fact lost a lot of weight. His face is but a dried-out mask that a stubbly beard has made even uglier. He slaps himself a few times to fully wake himself up before addressing his reflection:

"You're not going to let that scum ruin your life, are you, Abou Seif? You really sealed their lips once. Now let them rot in their mass graves . . . you don't have to worry about running into them around here. You know the dead are yesterday's news by now. Once they're down there in their little holes, they're out of sight, out of mind. If they come back to wander through your memories, what do you think you should do? You give them a kick in the ass, that's what. It's that easy. They don't deserve another look. They weren't even worth much when they were alive."

He pats down his moustache, scowls intently to psych himself up, and then, feeling a bit more cheerful, turns towards the bidet to urinate.

"You weren't afraid of anybody. And it's not some rotten stiff who's gonna stop you from sleeping. You've seen a lot worse, my friend. You dealt with so much crap that you don't even have any more saliva left to go spit on them. So relax, okay? There's nothing to be gained by bringing them all back. You knocked them off, got it? Dead, gone. They can't step on your toes anymore; you've got to tell yourself that once and for all."

He goes back towards the wash-basin and turns the faucet on. No water. He bangs on the sink, all put out: "More stinking water rationing. Why don't those shithead politicians build some desali-

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nation factories around here? When those dirty demagogues open their big fat mouths, they're at their absolute best. When it comes to actually doing something, however, well, that's too much to ask of them apparently."

"Go back to bed," his wife orders.

"Not sleepy."

"Come on, get back in here. . . ."

"I'm good right where I am."

"You're worried that you're going to have some more nightmares, aren't you?!"

"Stop provoking me, you bitch."

"That's it, you're scared of your nightmares."

Abou Seif lets out another curse and stomps into the bedroom: "Are you gonna shut your mouth, you slut?!"

His wife won't let him affect her. She remains on her knees in the middle of the bedroom. As she holds on to a candleholder, an aggressive look crosses her face.

"You're not going to touch me with those butcher's hands anymore."

"You really want to see me flip out, don't you? That's what you want, isn't it?!"

His wife lowers her arm and wistfully looks at the candleholder. Confused, she ventures: "I'm exhausted. I'm trying to help you, and you, you always take things the wrong way. Does that seem like a life to you? I'm sick of having to walk on eggshells all the time. Everything I say seems to wound you in some way. It's unbearable. As for myself, I worry about you. And you, you're ready to pounce on my every word. This can't go on any longer, Abou Seif. I've had it up to here. Either you turn in a more positive direction, or we go our separate ways. I don't feel like getting my head blown off just for trying to help you."

"I didn't ask you for anything."

"I'm your wife, in case you forgot. I'm supposed to be sharing your life."

"Not my past. And that's where I'm having all my problems. Believe it or not, it's not easy at all. You don't slam the door on your past just like that. You try to get far away from it, and all you have to do is turn around to find it latching on to you. If you really want to make yourself useful, put a zipper on your mouth and get lost. That way, at least, there's no danger of your coming out with any more crap like that. In case you've forgotten, I've just come back from a really distant place. I fought a war, for God's sake! And just so you know, war is no fun at all . . . I guarantee it. Once they hit you deep down there where it hurts, it's impossible to come out of it fully intact. You can't look at the world with the same eyes anymore. You turn right, you turn left, there's no way to keep track of the hundreds of ghosts you leave behind in your wake. I tried, however. God knows how many times I closed my eyes so tight my tem-

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ples cracked. Nothing doing. In the darkness, in bright daylight, wherever you go, wherever you retire to, *they're* there, stubbornly lodged in your memory banks, desperately hitched to your guts. I feel that even if I were to burn a hole through my brain or immolate myself with a flame-thrower, I wouldn't be able to get rid of them. And all the guilt in the world could never reconcile you with them. It's true, I did really rotten things—evil, unspeakable acts—but I've repented, for goodness' sake! I've asked for forgiveness . . . what good does it do? Nothing . . . yet, at the time, I was convinced that I was on the right side, that I was fighting for a noble cause. I had decided to sacrifice my life for an Islamic state. I had faith! I dreamed of a pure race, of a colossal nation, of an unbeatable empire, handsome and strong like a god; I dreamed of a sterilized planet that was finally rid of its vermin, its lowlifes, its freaks; a splendid society with its sublime men, with purified gazes, with faces so radiant they looked like summer suns. I wanted to contribute to that glorious goal, make myself useful instead of drying up hanging around street corners, harassing passersby and acting like a smart-ass all the time. Can you imagine? A race of kings, a community of the just, and me, valiant, courageous, proud of my commitments to eternity. No one ever offered me such a fabulous proposition; I never thought I was up to such a task."

His wife is moved. She tries to calm him down.

"Don't touch me!" He pushes her away in disgust. "You've got nothing to say to me. Someone who hasn't fought a war can't possibly understand what I'm talking about."

He goes back to the bathroom. He spits, and the faucet lets out a long whistling sound. Suddenly, a reddish streak streams down from it; effervescent blood floods the sink and starts cascading onto the tiles with an unbearable hissing sound.

Abou Seif takes a few steps backwards. He's incredulous. Blood flows in all directions, splatters all over the walls, squirts with increasing volume, and even reaches the ceiling. . . . Terrified, Abou Seif holds his head in his hands and starts screaming, shrieking . . .

"I'm here, dear. Abou Seif, Abou Seif, wake up. It's just a dream."

Abou Seif wakes up. He's in bed. In a state of shock. A wrinkled blanket is wrapped around his waist, dripping with sweat. His entire body is shivering and his teeth chatter uncontrollably with a strange intensity. He climbs out of bed, determined to put an end to all of this, rushes towards the bathroom but stops in his tracks, stunned by the immaculate whiteness of the walls.

He rubs his eyes, vigorously, furiously.

His wife is right behind him and takes him by the shoulders. He recoils in horror, as though he has just been electrocuted.

"Darling, it's only me."

"You scared me."

Abou Seif is at the end of his rope when he finally weakens and

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bursts into tears. His wife takes his head and rests it tenderly against her shoulder.

"I can't take it anymore . . ."

"It'll be okay, dear."

"What the hell do you know?" he screams, pushing her away from him.

The rest of his cries are choked by a gurgling sound. His wife's physiognomy has changed. The woman who is holding him in her arms is somebody else: an old Bedouin woman. She is small and haggard. Her face is decorated with sinister tattoos.

"Who are you?"

The stranger tries using her hands to tell him that she is unable to speak.

"Where do you come from, you . . . ?"

She raises her chin all of a sudden: Her throat has been slit from one end to the other.

Abou Seif cries out, and retreats behind his hands. As he reopens his eyes, his wife is lying on the floor. The stranger has vanished. The only sound comes from some clear and bizarrely troubling water streaming from the faucet.

"This is not happening. Nora, this is absurd . . . absurd . . ."

His uncertain fingers sift carefully through the sleeper's red hair, touch her forehead, and stop dead in their tracks. Immobilized. Nora is ice cold. Abou Seif falls over. The walls disappear. He's on a street.

"What's this carnival all about? I'm really losing it."

The streetlamps twinkle. A voluminous moon emerges from the opaqueness, as white as a punctured eyeball. Anarchistic noises invade the silence; the grumbling intensifies and spreads throughout the night; *Duhv! duhv! duhv!* . . . the ground is vibrating. At the end of the street, first in little groups, then in large regiments, hundreds of mutilated, bloodied kids come forward, in tatters, then women and old men, emaciated shepherds with their flocks, with faces so pallid that they seem almost phosphorescent . . .

Abou Seif gets up and starts running through the fields as though he were possessed by a demon: "No, no, noooo . . ."

"Abou Seif . . . Abou Seif . . ."

He's on all fours. At the foot of his bed. His wife looks down on him, tries to grab on to him so she can lift him up.

"I tried to restrain you," she explains, "but you're too heavy. You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"I'm not completely awake, am I? It's those damned dreams again. They're making a jackass out of me . . ."

"What bad dreams?"

"Don't get near me, will you. I want to know whether I'm awake or if this nightmare is still going on."

"You're awake, my dear."

"Prove it."

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"I'm telling you, you're awake."

"I don't believe you."

"Come on, you must be kidding. You had a violent dream and fell out of bed."

Since he refuses to take her word for it, she finds a small carafe and starts to sprinkle him with ice-cold water. "Do you believe me now?"

Abou Seif lets the water trickle down his face, down to his waist, down his pajama pants. He is attuned to its coldness, its flow. . . . With his fingertips, he feels his wet skin, gives himself a pinch, is distinctly aware of his nails biting into his chest . . . there's no doubt about it: He's awake.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Five o'clock."

"When is that damned sun going to come up?

"Go back to sleep, love. We have a long trip this morning. You'll need all your energy."

Abou Seif remembers. This stimulates him.

"I'll take you wherever you want to go, but I have no intention of going back to sleep. Sleep is untenable for me right now."

He staggers into the living room, falls into an armchair, and turns the radio on. He is slightly comforted by Cheb Mami's crystal voice. Unable to remain still, he goes towards the kitchen, finds some cheese in the fridge, and bites into it voraciously. He goes back to the bathroom. For a split second, he's afraid of getting near the sink. He gets ahold of himself, and, with a firm grip, turns the faucet on, gets undressed, jumps in the shower, hums a little tune. Soon, a bubbly soap rises from his hairy chest. He's thinking of the road trip that awaits him, of all the shortcuts he needs to negotiate; he smiles as he thinks of that good old mother whom he misses and whom he can't wait to see again.

He quickly puts his bathrobe on and returns to the living room. The radio is sizzling. The bathroom door slams shut behind him. Someone has turned the shower on. Torrents of water inundate the hallway.

"Nora . . ."

He opens the door, and stops dead in his tracks: Nora is lying on the floor with her arms crossed and her guts flying. *Duhv! duhv! duhv!* The floor shakes. A quiet crowd has gathered in the staircase. In one fell swoop, a ragtag mob begins to swarm excitedly all over the foyer. The walls disappear again.

"Have you bloody well finished!" Abou Seif roars. "You no longer exist. You're dead and buried."

A blistering hand scorches his shoulder.

"Let go of me," Abou Seif demands as he tries to wrench himself free. "Let go of me."

"It's just me," Nora tells him as she shakes him by the shoulder.

Abou Seif finds himself back in bed, with his wife watching over him benevolently. "No," he nods as he pushes Nora's hand away and

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leaps out of his covers. He is pale; his hair is disheveled; his knees are rubbery. "You're not going to get me this time, you old witch."

"But what on earth are you talking about?"

"Don't even get near me!"

In a complete frenzy, he looks all around and finds the candelabrum.

"It's me, Nora."

"You're not Nora. And I'm not fully awake. I've had it up to here and I'm going to squash you all, you bunch of scum, you."

Caught in a tenebrous spiral, he throws himself onto his wife and starts to bang, bang, bang . . .

Outside their window, the sun rises and turns a deaf ear to Nora's cries. Slowly, the city awakes. A truck growls somewhere. The early birds are making a groggy but steady ruckus. Abou Seif stares at the bloodstained candleholder now punctured with bone fragments. The phone rings, seven times in fact. Abou Seif continues to stare at the candleholder.

"I know it's that wretched dream," he says, crouching over his wife's inert body. "I'm not going to let them do it to me again. I'm going to just wait here until I wake up once and for all."

He waits, waits, waits . . .

He'll wait a long time.

The new day has now fully engulfed the room. Its light ricochets off the furniture. The children's screams smash against the window. Nora is no longer bleeding. The brownish pool in which she cowers has now coagulated. Abou Seif releases the candelabrum, which falls to the floor, hits his ankle, and rolls under the bedside table. "This isn't happening," the penitent grouses belligerently. At last, he realizes exactly what is happening to him and he holds his head in his hands. ●

BLOG BYTES **(continued from p. 107)** Ray Banks claims to be an "author, raconteur, black belt, sex-bomb, evil hypnotist, champion sheepshearer, 'seventies throwback, Prince impersonator, real saxophonist on Gerry Rafferty's 'Baker Street,' militant feminist, and America's Next Top Model. . . . Oh, and what you heard is true—he did shoot a man in Reno just to watch him die." Banks's novels aren't for the faint of heart, and neither is his blogging, which can be found at his website, *The Saturday Boy* (**http://www.thesaturdayboy.com**). Like J. D. Rhoades, Banks is a man of strong opinions about books, movies, and music, and his site, like his novels, isn't for the faint of heart. Still, I don't believe that bit about Reno.

And speaking of a man whose books aren't for the faint of heart, I'm reminded of Allan Guthrie. His *Hard Man* is in the *Grand Guignol* tradition, though in person he's quite mild-mannered and known to his friends, and possibly his enemies, as "Sunshine." His *Noir Originals* site (**http://www.allanguthrie.co.uk**) has articles of interest on writers like William Campbell Gault and Bruno Fischer.

For Bill Crider's own blog see **http://billcrider.blogspot.com.** ●

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THE JURY BOX (continued from p. 89)
*** Kathy Lynn Emerson: *Face Down O'er the Border,* Perseverance, $14.95. In 1577 Scotland, Susanna, Lady Appleton comes to the aid of her friend and relative by marriage Catherine Russell, accused of the murder of her mother-in-law. The latest in a consistently rewarding series has the usual strengths in pace, plot, prose, and background detail.

*** Kathy Lynn Emerson: *No Mortal Reason,* Pemberley, $17.95. All the characters in this third novel about 1880s American journalist Diana Spaulding have something to hide, including the sleuth. Without consulting her, fiancé Ben Northcote has registered them at an upstate New York hotel as husband and wife, a pretense she tries to go along with without actually lying. The hotel's owners are, unbeknownst to them (and she isn't telling), Diana's uncles. A murdered female skeleton found during a renovation of the property exposes still more secrets. The treatment of this entertaining and well-researched whodunit is not as comic as this summary suggests.

*** Tess Gerritsen: *The Bone Garden,* Ballantine, $25.95. In 1830 Boston, the continuing need for fresh cadavers and the crimes of a slasher known as the West End Reaper complicate the lives of several medical students, including the young Oliver Wendell Holmes. The briefer present-day story, allowing a perfunctory early role for series sleuth Maura Isles, might profitably have been jettisoned. Before going slightly off the rails in a tidy sentimental conclusion, the novel delivers superbly its harrowing account of early nineteenth-century medical practice.

*** Rosemary Rowe: *A Coin for the Ferryman,* Headline/Trafalgar, $24.95. The latest case for Longinus Flavius Libertus, pavement maker and sleuth of second-century Roman Britain, begins with the ceremony to free his young slave Junio and includes a fulsome, sometimes disgusting description of a banquet honoring a visiting dignitary. The mystery: Who is the young man in woman's clothing found murdered on Libertus's property? For Roman Empire detection, Rowe may rank second only to Steven Saylor.

Saylor's latest, *Roma* (St. Martin's, $25.95), is a multigenerational saga rather than a case for Gordianus the Finder, but one chapter, "An Architect of His Own Fortune," can stand alone as a fine crime story.

Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot novels and stories weren't historicals when they were written, but research into the between-World-Wars period for their adaptation for British television gives added resonance to the well-illustrated coffee-table book by Vanessa Wagstaff and Stephen Poole, *Agatha Christie: A Reader's Companion,* first published in 2004 and now in trade paperback (Aurum/Trafalgar Square, $19.95). ●

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A Scandal in Montreal

by Edward D. Hoch

The central idea for the Holmes pastiche with which Edward D. Hoch concludes this issue—a meeting of Sherlock Holmes and Stephen Leacock—came to him after writing the foreword to the collection *Leacock's Mysteries,* published in 2007 by The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box. Next month Mr. Hoch returns in his own voice with a new Stanton and Ives story.

1. The Crime

My old companion Sherlock Holmes had been in retirement for some years when I had reason to visit him at his little Sussex villa with its breathtaking view of the English Channel. It was August of 1911 and the air was so still I could make out a familiar humming. "Are the bees enough to keep you busy?" I asked as we settled down at a little table in his garden.

"More than enough, Watson," he assured me, pouring us a little wine. "And it is peaceful here. I see you have walked from the station."

"How so, Holmes?"

"You know my methods. Your face is red from the sun, and there is dust from the road on your shoes."

"You never change," I marveled. "Are you alone here or do you see your neighbors?"

"As little as possible. They are some distance away, but I know they look out their windows each morning for signs of a German invasion. I fear they have been taking Erskine Childers too seriously."

It was eight years since publication of *The Riddle of the Sands,* but people still read it. "Do you fear war, too?"

"Not for a few years. Then we shall see what happens. But tell me what brings you here on a lovely summer's day. It has been some time since you spent a weekend with me."

"A telegram was sent to you at our old Baker Street lodgings, all

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the way from Canada. Mrs. Hudson couldn't find your address, so she brought it to me."

"How is she these days?"

"Infirm, but in good spirits."

"I have a housekeeper here who tends to my needs. But she is off today. If you wish to stay for dinner I can offer you only a slice of beef and bread."

"There is no need, Holmes. I came only to deliver this telegram."

"Which could have been delivered more easily by the postal service."

"It seemed important," I told him, "and I have little enough to do in my own retirement. Not even bees!"

"Well then, let us see about this urgent message."

He opened the envelope and we read it together. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes, 221B Baker Street, London. Dear Mr. Holmes, Excuse intrusion on your time, but am in urgent need of help. My son Ralph Norton gone from McGill University. Police suspect him of murder. Please come! I beg you!" It was signed simply, Irene.

"What is this, Holmes?" I asked. "Do you know the meaning of it?"

"All too well," he answered with a sigh.

"What Irene is this? Certainly not Irene Adler. She has been dead some twenty years."

"She was reported to have died, but I always doubted it. Irene was born in New Jersey, and after her marriage here to Godfrey Norton I suspected they might have fled to America to escape questions about the Bohemian affair. If this is truly from her, she would be fifty-three now, four years younger than me and not an old woman by any means. She might well have a son of university age."

"But what can you do from here, Holmes?"

"From here, nothing." He pondered the problem for several minutes, staring at her address at the bottom of the telegram. "I must respond to her at once," he decided. "This telegram was sent four days ago, on the twelfth."

"What will you tell her?"

"She begs my help, Watson. How can I refuse her?"

"You mean you would travel to Canada?" I asked in astonishment.

"I would, and I shall be immensely grateful if you are able to accompany me."

Within a week's time we were at sea, approaching the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. I wondered how Holmes ever persuaded me to accompany him on such a lengthy journey, and yet I knew the answer. I had to be present when he met Irene Adler one more time. I had to see her for myself, after all these years.

Our ship docked at one of the quays adjacent to the center of Montreal and we took a carriage to our hotel. I was surprised at the number of motor cars in the streets, and astounded at the sumptuous

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mansions in the city's center—the sort of homes that would be far removed from London back home. Our driver informed us that these were the homes of the city's financial and industrial magnates, an area known as the Golden Square Mile.

We checked into a small hotel across the street from the site of a new Ritz-Carlton Hotel under construction. It was on Rue Sherbrooke Ouest, close to the university, and after a telephone call to her Irene said she would join us at the hotel. I could see that Holmes was a bit fidgety at the prospect of the meeting. "I trust I will be able to help the woman with her problem," he confided. "I have never forgotten her, over all these years."

Presently the desk clerk telephoned to say that Mrs. Irene Norton was downstairs. Holmes and I went down to find her waiting in a secluded corner of the lobby, seated alone on a sofa wearing a long skirt and flowered blouse and hat. I recognized her at once from the photograph Holmes kept of her. She was still as slim and dainty as she had been on the opera stage, with a face as lovely as ever. Only a few gray hairs hinted at the passing years. "Good day, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," she said by way of greeting, almost duplicating her words when once she had followed him disguised as a boy. "And Dr. Watson. I must say, both of you have changed very little since our London days."

"You are most kind, madam," Holmes said with a little bow. "I am sorry we cannot be meeting under more pleasant circumstances."

She bid us be seated with her on the sofa. "These have been terrible weeks for me. I was at my wit's end when I telegraphed you, not even knowing if you were still available as a private consultant."

"I am retired," he told her, "but always available if you need me."

She smiled slightly. "I am honored that you should travel across an ocean for me."

"Have you lived in Montreal long?"

She nodded. "After our wedding, Godfrey felt we should leave England. Following a brief time on the Continent, he established quite a successful law practice here and we had a wonderful son, Ralph."

"I remember Godfrey as a remarkably handsome man," Holmes said.

"Sadly, he passed away three years ago. If he was with me now, perhaps I would not have summoned you across an ocean."

"But what of your son? In the telegram you said he had disappeared following a murder."

"That is so. I must tell you the entire story from the beginning. I believe it was his father's death that set Ralph off. He was never the same after that. He took to carousing at night and neglecting his schoolwork."

"What is his age?"

"He is nineteen, about to enter his second year at McGill. He met

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a young woman during his first year, a pretty red-haired classmate named Monica Starr. She seemed like a nice girl and I had no objection to their friendship. I thought it might get him back on track. But this summer he discovered there was a rival for her affections, a German student named Franz Faber who was entering his final year at McGill. I know the two boys had a fight, and Ralph came home a few weeks ago with a bloody nose. But it wasn't anything more than that. Ralph couldn't have—" Her voice broke then.

"What happened, Irene?" Holmes asked her softly.

"Two weeks ago, on a Thursday night, Franz Faber was stabbed to death outside a pub frequented by McGill students. It has caused a great scandal here. Things like this don't happen at McGill. "

"The university was in session during August?"

"They offer some summer courses each year. Apparently Faber was taking a language course. He was a German student with only a basic knowledge of English and French. My son was seen in the pub earlier and the police came to our house to question him. He'd come home about an hour before they arrived and went to his room without speaking to me."

"Was that unusual?"

"He's been moody lately. I thought nothing of it, but when I went to his room to summon him for the police, he wasn't there. Apparently he'd gone out the back door. The next morning I discovered that Monica Starr was missing too. The police are convinced he killed Faber, but I can't believe it. He was moody, yes, just like his father, but he'd never kill anyone."

Holmes tried to calm her. "I will do whatever I can for you, Irene. You must know that. Tell me, is there any place in the city or near here where they might have gone?"

"I'm not even convinced they're together."

"I think we can assume they are, whether or not he committed the crime. Was he friendly with any of his professors or instructors at McGill?"

She considered that for a moment. "There's Professor Stephen Leacock. He's a lecturer at McGill and he's published some economics books along with collections of humorous stories. Ralph was quite friendly with him."

"What about fellow students?"

"Only Monica, so far as I know."

"I'll speak to Leacock," Holmes said. "What about you? Are you still singing?"

She gave him a wan smile. "Very little, occasionally in local productions."

"That's too bad, Irene. You have a lovely voice."

"Find him for me, Mr. Holmes," she said. "You're the only one who can help me now."

"I'll do everything possible."

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We walked the short distance to the university, a series of stone buildings reached by a tree-lined carriageway from the street. A monument to James McGill, whose legacy helped found the institution ninety years earlier, stood in front of the central pavilion. Only a few students and faculty members were about, preparing for the upcoming autumn term. We asked directions to Professor Leacock's office and were directed to the political economy department in an adjoining building. Holmes led the way, moving with an intensity that surprised me.

"We have no time to lose, Watson. If the young man has indeed fled the scene it is important that we find him and convince him to return for his own good."

"Do you believe him to be guilty, Holmes?"

"It is much too soon to form an opinion."

When we located Leacock's tiny office, it was occupied by a slender young man who introduced himself as Rob Gentry. He'd been studying a map on the professor's desk and he told us, "Professor Leacock is out right now, but he should be returning shortly. There's an election coming up, you know. Please take a seat, gentlemen."

"Is he active in politics?" Holmes asked.

"Very much so, on the Conservative side. He's campaigning against our Liberal prime minister."

Almost at once a handsome broad-shouldered man with a thick moustache appeared in the doorway. "What's this? Visitors? We will need an additional chair, Rob."

"Yes sir."

"I am Professor Leacock," he said, extending his hand. I guessed him to be in his early forties, with just a hint of gray in his hair. "What can I do for you?"

"We have traveled here from London. This is my companion, Dr. Watson, and I am Mr. Holmes."

"Holmes? Holmes?" Leacock seemed astounded. "Surely not the great Mr. Sherlock Holmes!"

"The same," I replied, speaking for Holmes.

"I have published some humorous pieces about your great detective work, Mr. Holmes. At least I trust you will find them humorous."

Holmes ignored his words. "We have come on an urgent matter, Professor Leacock. Irene Norton has asked my help in finding her son, Ralph, who is suspected of murder."

Leacock seemed to pale at his words. "A terrible tragedy," he murmured.

"His mother says you were a friend of his."

"I still am. This entire business is beyond my comprehension." He shifted some papers on his desk.

"If you know his whereabouts, it would be best for the lad if we

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found him before the police."

"I know nothing," he insisted.

"Perhaps, but your assistant was studying a map on your desk when we entered, and now you have covered it up."

Leacock was silent for a moment, perhaps weighing his choices. Finally he said, "You are quite the detective, Mr. Holmes. Yes, I know where the boy is."

2. The Chase

Professor Leacock explained that he did his writing during summer vacations at a family cottage north of Lake Simcoe in the town of Orillia. It was some distance away from Montreal, actually north of Toronto. "It's on Old Brewery Bay on Lake Couchiching, but that's really an extension of Lake Simcoe."

"How do you get there?" Holmes asked.

"By train. The Canadian National Railway runs a line from Toronto through Orillia. It passes quite close to my cottage. I came back here with my family in early August as I always do, to prepare for the new term. It was just a few days before Franz Faber was killed."

"Did you know Faber?"

"Not personally. Rob here knew him."

Gentry nodded. "I used to see him in the pub on weekends. If he was between girlfriends we might have a few beers together."

Holmes looked thoughtful. "Did you see him the night he was stabbed?"

He shook his head. "I was at a picnic with some friends."

Holmes turned back to Leacock. "You said you know where young Norton is."

"He came to see me just after I returned to Montreal with my family. He wanted to get away for a few weeks, until the new term began. He wondered if I might know a place where he could go."

"And you suggested your cottage in Orillia?"

"I did."

"When was this?"

He consulted his desk calendar. "It would have been Wednesday, the ninth."

"Was he accompanied by the missing young woman, Monica Starr?"

"So far as I knew he went alone."

"And is still there now?"

"I believe so, yes. He planned to return the second week in September."

"Do you have a telephone at the cottage?"

"No. I like to spend the summers there with my wife and son, without needless interruptions."

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"Then tell me how to get there by train."

"It is a full day's journey from here, well over three hundred miles."

"Watson and I are used to riding trains in England."

Leacock smiled. "I am British myself, you know. My parents migrated to Canada when I was seven and I decided to go with them."

"A wise decision," Holmes said with a smile. "Now about your cottage—"

"I don't know what is happening with Ralph, but I seem to be responsible in part, since I allowed him to use my place. If you insist on going, I will journey with you. I don't want two strangers accosting him by surprise."

I sensed something unspoken, as if he feared Irene's son was indeed capable of violence. "Very well," Holmes agreed. "Let us take the first available train."

Professor Leacock turned to his assistant. "Can you handle things here for a few days, Rob?"

"Certainly, sir."

Leacock telephoned his wife to tell her of our plans. Then he said to Holmes, "There is an early-morning train tomorrow. We can be at the cottage before nightfall."

"Very well."

"Windsor Station is several blocks south of here. Go down Rue Peel, past Dominion Square, and it will be on your right. You can't miss it. I will meet you there at eight in the morning." As we were leaving he thrust a book of his writings into my hand. "Please read this tonight, Dr. Watson, especially my little story 'Maddened by Mystery.' I trust you and Mr. Holmes will find it all in good fun."

Once outside, Holmes stared up at the sky. "An odd sort of chap, but friendly enough. Before we travel to the cottage, though, I wish to speak with the local police."

Dealing with the Sûreté du Québec proved to be both better and worse than our frequent encounters with Scotland Yard. Better, because they tended to treat Holmes with a bit more respect than some of their British counterparts, but worse because it was difficult finding the detectives investigating the murder of Franz Faber. We finally were shown to a squad room where a detective named Jean Leblond greeted Holmes with a degree of respect.

"You are certainly well known to us here," he said. "Is this your first journey to Canada, Mr. Holmes?"

"It is."

"I trust you will find our country to your liking. Now what can I help you with?"

"I have been asked to look into the murder of a McGill University student named Franz Faber. I believe he was stabbed to death outside a pub a fortnight ago."

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Leblond flipped through the files on his desk. "Exactly a fortnight, on Thursday, the tenth. He lived only a few minutes after the attack."

"Were there any witnesses?" Holmes asked.

"No."

"Then why are you attempting to arrest Ralph Norton for this crime?"

"The two had fought over a woman. A police officer on patrol was the first to see Faber lying in the road. He'd been stabbed in the chest and was bleeding badly but still alive. The officer asked who stabbed him and he said Norton."

I could see that this dying statement had caught Holmes by surprise. "He's sure of that?"

The detective nodded. "He said Norton. The officer was certain. Add to that the fact that Ralph Norton fled when we came to question him and it makes a strong circumstantial case."

"Who was the woman they fought over?"

"Name is Monica Starr. She's disappeared too."

"Have you talked to her family?"

"They have a home up north, in Gaspe. She's been living on campus. They know nothing about her disappearance and claim they haven't seen her all summer. She'd remained at the university for some extra courses."

"Something of a coincidence, all these extra summer courses," Holmes mused. "Was Ralph Norton at the pub that night?"

"The bartender saw him earlier, but he wasn't there with Faber."

"Was the murder weapon recovered?"

"Not yet. We've searched the area without any luck."

When we left the Sûreté du Québec, I asked Holmes what he thought. "It seems that Ralph is the prime suspect," he answered. "We should call on Irene today, before we leave in the morning."

We called at her home, a smaller version of those mansions we'd seen on our way to the hotel. It was obvious that her husband's law practice had been profitable. Over tea Holmes explained about Leacock's cottage and told her we'd be traveling there in the morning. "You must prepare yourself, Irene. The police evidence is strong, even if not conclusive. If he's at the Leacock cottage, he might not be alone."

"That girl—"

Holmes nodded. "Monica Starr. She was here all summer with him. Something happened with the other boy, Franz Faber. They fought once and they may have fought again, outside the pub a fortnight ago. He spoke Ralph's name as he was dying."

"No!" She shook her head. "I can't believe my son would harm anyone."

"If I find him, I will have to bring him back."

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She turned away, not wanting to meet his quick eyes. "He's my only child, all that I have. You must be able to help him somehow."

Holmes sighed and told her, "I will do whatever I can."

That evening, as we prepared to retire to our rooms, I took the time to read the little story Stephen Leacock had given me earlier. "Holmes!" I exclaimed before I'd finished the first few pages. "This thing of Leacock's actually makes sport of you and your methods. He refers to you as the Great Detective and describes you wearing foolish disguises as you attempt to help the prime minister and the archbishop of Canterbury!"

"Am I mentioned by name?"

"No."

"Then I view it as a compliment if readers like you immediately identify me as the Great Detective."

But that did little to calm my outrage. As I finished my reading I gasped. "At the end he has you disguised as a dog and destroyed by the dogcatchers! The man is a scoundrel and a slanderer!"

Holmes smiled just a bit. "Or a humorist."

"Do we really want to travel with such a person?"

"I am doing it for Irene and her son, not for Leacock."

And in the morning we met him at the station as planned. His teaching assistant, Rob Gentry, had come with him, which was something of a surprise. "I have some papers at the cottage," Leacock explained. "Since we'll be there at least overnight, Rob can sort through them for me and decide what I need to bring back here."

As it turned out, Gentry's presence was a good thing. It gave me someone to converse with on the long journey, and an excuse for addressing none of my remarks to the blackguard Leacock. The journey across eastern Canada was a picturesque one, and Leacock explained to Holmes why he'd chosen a summer home so far removed from Montreal. "I grew up in this area, after we came here from England. We had a place in Egypt, not far from the south shore of Lake Simcoe. A colorful country, especially in summer. The winters in Montreal are often brutal."

"It is a large country," Holmes remarked.

"Indeed it is. One can travel hundreds of miles in western Canada and see nothing but wheat fields. I believe the Lord said, 'Let there be wheat,' and Saskatchewan was born."

It was late afternoon when we left the train at Orillia and took a carriage the few short blocks to Leacock's cottage. Since there was no telephone, he'd been unable to announce our arrival in advance. A handsome young man with sandy hair and a few freckles was seated on the porch as we left the carriage. He immediately put down the Rider Haggard novel he was reading and stood up.

"Professor Leacock! What brings you here?"

"I have bad news for you, lad. Franz Faber was murdered the

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night before you left Montreal. The police want to question you about it."

At his words the screen door behind him opened and a lovely red-haired girl in a blue shift appeared. She had a dimple in her chin and a smile to charm any man. "Ralph was with me all the time," she told us. "He couldn't have killed anyone."

Holmes inserted himself into the conversation. "Would this be the missing Miss Starr?" he asked.

"Who are you?" Norton demanded.

"Sherlock Holmes. I am an old friend of your mother, who summoned me from England to find you."

He shook his head. "I didn't kill anyone, and I'm not going back to see the police. We're staying right here." His glance shifted to me. "Who is this man?"

"My associate, Dr. Watson," Holmes responded.

He studied me more closely. "A medical doctor?"

"Of course," I told him.

"And you know Rob, my assistant," Leacock said.

Ralph smiled slightly. "We see each other at the pub."

Leacock glanced around. "We only have three bedrooms. Is there room for us all overnight?"

"Sure," Ralph conceded. "Follow me, Mr. Holmes. We'll get everyone settled and have a bit of supper. You must be hungry after that long train ride."

Holmes and I drew a small bedroom at the rear of the cottage. When we were alone I asked, "Why was he so interested that I was a doctor?"

"You must try to be more observant, Watson. We now know why she didn't spend the summer at home with her parents. Even wearing that large shift I could detect a bit of a bulge. I believe Monica Starr to be at least six months pregnant."

3. The Capture

Seeing her seated at the dinner table later that evening, I had to agree with Holmes's diagnosis. The girl was certainly pregnant, probably entering her third trimester. It appeared that Ralph was planning to remain here with her rather than return to McGill. I wondered if Leacock and Gentry were aware of her condition. After we ate, there was still enough light for us to walk along Old Brewery Bay. It was a small arm of the lake, with Leacock's house at the innermost part. I could see that Irene's son and Monica Starr were supremely happy, even with these unexpected guests. They played catch with a red rubber ball, occasionally tossing it to Leacock or Gentry as well. At one point, Ralph ran ahead and shouted to her. "North! Catch!"

"North?" Holmes questioned after she'd caught the ball and

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tossed it on to Gentry.

"I'm from up north, so naturally the guys started calling me North Starr, or just North."

"Do you like it at McGill?"

"Sure, what's not to like? That's where I met Ralph. We'll be getting married soon, after we break the news to our folks."

"I wish you all the happiness you deserve," Holmes said.

Leacock had been standing close enough to overhear the conversation, and he commented to me, "Many a man in love with a dimple makes the mistake of marrying the whole girl."

"You do not approve?" I asked, addressing him for the first time since our journey began.

"It is not for me to say. Life, as we often learn too late, is in the living."

As the evening wore on, I found myself forced into further conversation with Leacock. "Did you have an opportunity to read my little piece on the Defective Detective, Dr. Watson?"

"I did, sir. It seems to me you could devote your talents to more important matters."

"Ah, but you see, I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole of the *Encyclopedia Britannica.*"

I had no answer for that.

Holmes and I both slept well that night. The water was still, and a big change from our Atlantic crossing. In the morning, over breakfast, the talk turned serious. It was Leacock who brought matters to a head. "You have to come back with us, Ralph. If you don't, I must tell the police where you are."

But it was Monica who rose to his defense. "Why do you have to tell them? He's done nothing wrong."

Leacock turned appealingly toward Holmes, who said quietly, "Franz Faber named Ralph as he was dying. He told a police officer it was Norton."

"But that's impossible! I was with him all that night."

"No, you weren't, Monica," Ralph told her. "This was Thursday, the night before we left. Remember, I had to pick up some things from home. I was gone for over an hour."

"You couldn't kill anyone, Ralph," she said with a sigh. "Franz might not have seen his killer. You two'd had a fight, so your name was the one he spoke."

"He was stabbed in the chest," Holmes told her. "It's most likely he did see his killer." Then he turned back to Ralph. "What had you and Faber fought about?"

He gave a snort. "We fought over Monica. It felt like I was still a kid in high school."

"Is that true?" he asked her.

"I guess so. I went out with Franz for a while and he didn't want to give me up."

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If we were to be back in Montreal that night we had to be leaving soon. Rob Gentry had gathered up the material Leacock wanted to bring back, but there was still no agreement from Ralph. "I'm not going to ride all day on the train just to tell some ignorant detective I'm innocent."

"I can stay here alone for one night," Monica told him.

"Or you can come back with him," Professor Leacock suggested. "That might be best."

She shook her head. "No. I came here to get away from people—"

Holmes spoke softly. "Dr. Watson could examine you if you are concerned about your condition."

"It's not that. I just don't want to go back there."

"And neither do I," Ralph decided.

Leacock tried to reason with them. "Sooner or later the Montreal police will learn where you are, Ralph. You'll be arrested and taken back there in handcuffs. That's hardly something you'd want your mother to see."

"There's no evidence that I killed him."

"You fought, and he named you as his killer," Holmes said.

"Our fight was several days earlier. There was no reason to renew it or stab him. Monica was coming with me. I asked you about this cottage and you gave me the key a full day before Faber was killed."

"You make a good case for your innocence," Holmes agreed. "But the police want a killer and you're the only suspect they have."

It was then that Monica Starr spoke. "They have another," she said quietly. "I killed Franz Faber."

"Monica!" Ralph shouted. "Don't ever say that again! Someone might believe it."

I stared at Leacock and Gentry, seeing the disbelief in their faces. But than I glanced at Holmes and saw something quite different, something like satisfaction. "Of course she killed him. I've known it since last night. But I had to hear it from her own lips."

"How could you have known?" Ralph asked. "What happened last night?"

"You called her by a nickname, 'North.' When Franz Faber lay dying, he reverted to his native language. The officer asked who stabbed him and he didn't say Norton but *Norden,* the German word for north. He was saying you stabbed him, Monica. Do you want to tell us why you did it?"

She stared down at the floor, unable to look any of us in the eye. Finally she answered. "I love Ralph, I love him so much. My brief time with Franz was a big mistake, but when I became pregnant he threatened to tell Ralph the baby was his and not Ralph's. I couldn't let him do that. I begged him not to, but he wouldn't listen. I'd brought a knife along to threaten him, but when he saw it he just laughed. That was when I stabbed him."

"Monica—" It was almost a sob from Ralph Norton's lips.

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The six of us took the long train ride back to Montreal together. Holmes telephoned Detective Leblond from a stop along the route and he was waiting for us at the station.

Holmes and I took a carriage to Irene Norton's home. He insisted on giving her the news in person. "Your son will be home soon," he told her. "He's gone to the Sûreté with Monica Starr."

"Have you solved the case?" she wanted to know. "Is my son innocent?"

"Innocent of all but a youthful love. Only time can cure him of that." He told her of Monica's confession.

"And the baby?" she asked. "Who is the father?"

"We didn't ask, but it seems Faber had reason to believe it was his. It may take Ralph some time to get over that."

She dipped her eyes, and may have shed a tear. "A scandal in Montreal. Who would have thought it? First me, all those years ago in Bohemia, and now my son."

"No one is blaming you, or your son."

She lifted her head to gaze at Holmes. "How can I ever thank you? Will you be going back now?"

He nodded. "I am retired and keep bees at my villa in Sussex. If you are ever in the vicinity, it would be my pleasure to show it to you."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, and held out her hand to him. ●

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